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EDITED BY  
**JERRY POURNELLE AND JIM BAEN**

# **FAR FRONTIERS**



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**FAR FRONTIERS**

EDITED BY  
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## **FAR FRONTIERS**

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# EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO: DYDEETOWN GIRL

by  
F. Paul Wilson

Some people are apt to mistake *Far Frontiers* for a conservative, not to say reactionary, magazine. Well, it just ain't so.

We are no more conservative than was that hatchet-wielding fanatic, George Washington. No more reactionary than Sam Adams or Thomas Jefferson. (Before the flaming ardor of a Tom Paine we turn quite pale.) Rather, we are classic liberals who believe in the ultimate rightness of free markets and free minds. Sweet reason is our lodestar, liberty our heart's desire.

Alas the word "liberal" has been taken from us and perverted until the new meaning is the very opposite of the old. Oh well, if we can't be liberals, we'll be *anti-liberals*. But please don't get us wrong: keep off our backs and we're not the least bit dangerous. Like the Dydeetown girl, all we really want is to be free. . .

—JPB



# DYDEETOWN GIRL

F. Paul Wilson

## 1.

Jean Harlow.

Couldn't place her face at once, then it came to me. Seen her before in the flesh. The too-blond hair, the too-white skin, the puggish face. Hard to forget her even if, like me, you weren't particularly attracted to the look despite the way she filled out the dark blue clingsuit.

"You're Mr. Dreyer, aren't you?" she said in a tinny voice as the door slid closed a couple of centimeters behind her.

I suddenly became interested in my desktop where a few cockroach droppings adhered to the surface. Flicked one off as I told her, "You can find your way back out the way you came in."

"I want to hire you."

I held my temper and kept after the roach chips. I was tired from a long string of long days sitting here waiting for something to do.

"Don't work for clones."

Not completely true, but I didn't advertise the truth.

Her breath made a raspy sound as she sucked it in. "How—?"

"Never forget a face," I said, finally looking up at her.

Did a search for a Dydeetown girl a while back. Went to the library and watched a vid on them and the history of Dydeetown. Got to know a lot of their faces and the stories behind them. This Harlow was a big thing in her day, which was Way Back When. The clone before me wasn't a perfect match—they never are—but pretty damn close. Couldn't see what anyone saw in her, but maybe tastes were different then. Why anyone would want to hunt up her leftovers, steal a piece, and clone out a new Jean Harlow was beyond me.

But then, I don't waste my thumb in Dydeetown.

"You worked for Kushegi. She told me."

The roach dung became interesting again. "That was a special case."

"What was so special about it?"

"None of your business."

Truth was, I had been more broke than usual then—my thumb was getting more red lights than Dydeetown's east wall. My stomach likes at least one meal a day and the rest of me has developed other needs. Briefly put, I was what you call desperate back then. Hadn't come a long way since.

"Hear me out," she said.

"I'll let you out." Still had my pride.

Something clunked heavily amid the poppy seed droppings on the desktop. I didn't even have to look up to see it. It rolled right under my nose—round, flat, and gold.

"Talk," I said.

She glanced back at my cubicle door as if to make sure it was closed good and tight, then sat down in one of the pair of chairs on the other side of my desk.

"I thought you'd have a bigger office than this."

"Not a materialist," I said, picking up the coin as I leaned back. Cool and heavy. Twenty-five grams heavy. A kyfhon coin. Point nine-nine-nine fine if up to their usual standards. Illegal, of course, but who's going to tell those Eastern Sect toughos they can't mint their own coins? Not me, brother. Not me. "Get many kyfho-types as clients in Dydeetown?"

"Some."

I said nothing more, just sat there and worked a little crease into the surface of the coin with my fingernail. Finally, she went on, as I knew she would.

"Occasionally I'll do business with a kyfhon, but mostly I get coin from people who don't want to leave any thumbprints in Dydeetown."

"Nobody likes to leave a trail to Dydeetown."

"Yet they do," she said, lifting her chin and meeting me eye to eye. "Every night they come around with fat groins and fat thumbs—"

"—to find 'the most beautiful women and the handsomest men in all history,'" I said, mimicking the slogan.

"You are so right, Mr. Dreyer." There was not a trace of shame in her voice. But why should there have been? She was only a clone. She didn't know any better. It was her customers who should be ashamed.

"So what can I do for you?" It galled me to be sitting here talking business with her like she was a Realpeople, but that was real gold in my hand, and I needed it real bad.

"I need to find someone."

Oh, great. Another missing Dydeetowner.

"Why me?"

"Kushegi said you were good."

I bristled. How could the clone of a Twenty-First Century holo sex star judge my work? By what—I doused it. Fruitless path. Waste of energy.

"She didn't get what she wanted," I said.

"True—Raquel was dead when you found her. But you *did* find her."

"And so I'm supposed to find *your* lover now?"

She nodded yes. Timidly.

I flipped the coin back onto the desk. "No thanks."

"Please?"

If the plea in her voice was supposed to melt my heart, it failed.

"Whoever it is, let the owner go after him. Or her. Or let the *owner* hire me. Not you."

"This is a Realpeople I'm talking about."

"Oh." I picked up the coin again and leaned back in my chair. Still didn't like the sound of this but I had nothing better to do. "What's the name?"

"Kyle." Her voice quavered and her eyes glistened. "Kyle Bodine." I thought she was going to cry, but she managed to hold it in.

"Look. If this guy hurt you or robbed or cheated you, get your owner on it."

"Nothing like that," she said through a sniff. "We were going to be married."

Almost went over backwards in my chair with that one.

"You were going to be *WHAT*?"

Guess I must have shouted because she jumped back like I'd pulled a blaster on her.

"M-married. We were going to be married."

I laughed. People talk about clones being dumb, but you never really appreciate *how* dumb until you talk to one. They know how to look good, how to smile real nice, how to give maximum pleasure

to a human body, but something must happen when they're cultured out. I mean something must get lost along the way. Because they are *dumb*!

Her face reddened. "Why are you laughing?"

"No Realpeople's going to marry a clone!"

"Kyle is! He loves me!"

"He was lying."

"He *wasn't*!" Her voice jumped a couple of notches as she rose from the chair and leaned over the desk. "I *mean* something to him! I'm *somebody* to him—not like the dirt I am to most everybody else!"

"Hey . . . easy there," I said. Didn't want her burning out of here along with her gold coin. "Nobody's calling anybody names here. It's just that Realpeople don't marry clones. I didn't make it that way—it's just a fact of life."

"And just the way you like it, right?"

"I don't hate clones, but I'm no oozer, either." Gold or not, I wasn't going to lie to her. I *don't* like clones. Truth of the matter is I can't think of many Realpeople I like much either. But I especially don't like collections of cells grown from a tissue culture parading around like human beings. "Bet your 'fiance' "—I said the word out of the corner of my mouth—"oozes real well, though. Probably one of those guys marching along the streets shouting 'Free the clones.' Probably wants to marry you to use you as a trophy. Show how sincere he is."

"I wasn't going to be his trophy—we were moving away."

"Where to?"

"The outworlds."

I leaned back in my chair—slowly this time—and studied her. This was getting nasty. As I said, I'm no clone-lover—as a matter of fact, I wish

there *were* no such things as clones. But that doesn't mean I think they should be mistreated. Realpeople made them, that makes us responsible. And someone had been dealing this especially dumb one a dirty hand. Like them or not, I can't condone cruelty to clones.

"Look," I said slowly, hoping she'd be able to catch on to what I was going to tell her. "Don't know how to tell you this, but there are a few things you should know. Such as, there's no way you can get to the outworlds. Only Realpeople can go. You need a greencard, and clones don't get greencards. They're Unpeople. They're property. They *belong* to someone—either to a person or to a corporation. Clones can't even have credit accounts, so it stands to reason that they can't just wander off to the stars whenever they please."

She opened her belt purse as I tried to figure out how I was going to explain the workings of Central Data to her in terms she would understand.

"You see, when you were born . . . or hatched, or whatever—"

"Deincubated," she said, still working at the belt purse.

"Whatever. They took a little piece of tissue and recorded your gene structure into Central Data. Your genotype will remain on record there until you die. Just like mine. Just like everybody's."

She nodded. "I know. And they can't clone another of me until I'm dead—the One Person/One Genotype law."

"So you know about that." I was puzzled. "What made you think you could get off-planet?"

She looked around like I might be hiding someone behind the desk or somewhere else in this shoebox-size cubicle. "Is what we say here secret? Really secret?"



"The word is 'confidential.' And yes, everything's secret. What've you got in your hand there?"

She pulled something out of her belt purse and laid it on my desk.

"This."

It was a greencard.

I was speechless for a moment. Clones get red-cards. They never get greencards. *Never*. It was impossible—but there it was on my desk.

"A fake. Got to be."

She shook her head. "No. It's real."

"You've tried it out?"

"I don't have to. I know it's real."

I picked it up. Sure looked real. This was getting stickier and stickier by the minute.

"You could wind up on the South Pole for having this, you know."

She nodded. "I know. But it won't matter when we get Out Where All The Good Folks Go."

Always hated that expression. Everybody seemed to refer to the outworlds that way. Everybody but me. Didn't like what it implied about us who stayed behind on Earth, although I couldn't deny that it might be true. But I stuck to the subject at hand.

"You need more than a card, you know. Unless someone's changed your status in Central Data from clone to Realpeople, this is nothing but green plastic. When they stick it and a skin scraping into their little machine at the spaceport it'll readout that there's no such Realpeople as you and you'll be arrested there and then for exporting stolen property—yourself."

She gave me a half-vacant smile. "I know. But that will never happen."

"How can you be so . . . ?"

She shrugged and smiled. "He took a skin sam-

ple and came back a few days later with the card. He loves me."

I looked at the greencard again. Seemed as real as my own. Couldn't figure it. A man who would go to this extreme for a clone must really . . . love her.

*Nah!*

But my face remained a picture of professional blandness.

"How long has this Kyle Bodine been missing?"

"Five days. We were supposed to meet at L-I Port by the shuttle dock Friday night. I haven't heard from him since Friday morning."

"Where do you think he is?"

"I don't know." Her eyes began to glisten again. "I don't *know!*"

"Maybe he just changed his mind."

She shook her head. Violently. "No! Never!"

"Okay, okay. Don't get excited." I got up and walked to the viddow behind my desk. Wished I could have looked out a real window instead of at this transmission from the outer wall, but I could barely keep up the rent on an inner cubicle, let alone afford one on the perimeter. My fingers kept turning the gold coin over and over in my right hand while the greencard lay cool and still in my left. Something wrong here. Something crazy.

"Can I have my card back?"

I turned and gave it to her. Real important to her, that card.

A cockroach—a big one—ran across my shoe then. I squashed it with a satisfying crunch when it got back to the floor. I was going to have to bring Ignatz back.

"All right. Let's find out what you know about this guy."

Turned out she didn't know all that much. It

had been what they call a whirlwind romance. Kyle Bodine worked for an import-export firm. He had contacts in the outworlds who would welcome him and his new wife. There were anticlone laws out there, but no one would have to know she was one. She said she had last seen him in Dydeetown on Friday morning. He had a medium-size compartment in one of the high rent districts in Manhattan. The door was keyed to her. She had already been there after many unanswered calls. No Kyle. No sign of foul play.

That's where I'd start.

"Okay," I said. "I get 200 a day plus expenses." I held up the gold coin. "This is worth more than a week in advance."

"If you find him before that—even if it's tonight—it's all yours."

She really wanted this guy back.

I told her I had some errands to run and would meet her at Bodine's apartment in a tenth.

I waited a while after she left, then took the downchute to streetlevel. I wanted to get rid of this gold before I tubed over to Manhattan. Not only was it illegal to possess, but it might get stolen before I could turn it into credit.

I knew where I could do that, no questions asked.

## 2.

The usual crowd was holding up the bar at Elmero's, the usual mix of aimless chatter and straying vapors filled the air. A howl came from the enclosure in the dimmest of the dim corners where someone was playing Procyon Patrol. Whoever he was—I'd never seen him before—he spun out of the enclosure and rolled on the floor, all the while swatting at his left shoulder where the fab-

ric of his jacket was burning. He got the fire out, stood up, shook himself, then reentered the enclosure. People pay extra to play Procyon Patrol at Elmero's since he partially disabled the dampers on the enemy lasers. When those aliens shoot back, they really shoot back. You can get hurt real bad in that game. That's why altered machines are illegal.

Lots of things are illegal at Elmero's.

Minn saw me from her spot behind the bar. She held up a vial of Dewar's green—my usual—and raised her eyebrows. I waved her off. Wasn't in the mood for a sniff right now. Needed to talk to the boss. I pointed toward the back room and she nodded.

"Busy, Elm?" I asked, sliding the pocket door open a bit and poking my face through.

"Sig! Come in!"

I did, sliding the door shut behind me.

"You're looking unhealthier than usual, Sig." He never passed up an opportunity to take a shot at my sallow complexion.

"Thanks, Elm. You're looking as robust as ever yourself."

Elmero was pushing two meters heightwise and he was as lean as he was long. His legs uncoiled from around each other as his recliner straightened him up.

"What can I do for you?"

"Need an exchange on this," I said, tossing him the coin.

He rode his chair over to the corner console and dropped the coin in a little cuplike thing that analyzed it, weighed it, factored in the day's spot price for gold, and came up with a figure only he could see. Elm liked gold. He had lots of dealings

outside the usual credit lanes and gold was universally accepted as barter.

"Give you sixteen hundred for it."

It was worth a good 2k and we both knew it but Elmero loved to haggle.

"I was figuring maybe seventeen or eighteen after taxes."

He smiled. I've warned him about that—it's an ugly smile. He said, "Why don't we settle on a net of fifteen?"

"Sounds good," I said. That was what I'd wanted when I walked in.

He reached over to his employer's wageboard and punched in some data. He knew my i-d number by heart.

"Okay, Sig," he said. "I just paid you eighteen hundred for a week's work. Which week you want it to be?"

I shrugged. "Last is as good as any."

He entered it. I waited a couple of seconds, then went over to his credit terminal and stuck my thumb in the hole. A press of the status key and I was rewarded with a credit readout of 1522—post automatic deduction of the taxes. At least I wouldn't be getting any more red lights and could stop making up excuses about my thumb transponder acting up and needing a replacement. Gets embarrassing after a while.

"Say, Elm . . . I saw a phony greencard today."

"Phony how?" He seemed mildly interested.

"Well, it really didn't belong to this person."

"If the genotype of the holder's cells doesn't match the one on the card, and if those two don't match with Central Data, what good is it?"

He wasn't getting my meaning. "I'm talking about Central Data—the change was made there."

Elm shrugged. "It can be done. Not on a routine

basis, of course, but if you know the right people and have the right amount of barter, changes can be made—criminal records erased, credit histories altered. Don't tell me that's news to you."

"No, that's not news. But have you ever heard of a clone being recategorized as Realpeople?"

At last a reaction from Elm: his eyebrows lifted.

"That might be difficult. The people in position to make such a change might refuse, no matter what price offered." He smiled that smile again. "They'd refuse on the grounds of 'principle,' I'm sure."

"But it could be done?"

"Of course—as long as you had a tissue sample to identify the genotype and your middleman was someone devious and subtly ingenious."

"Like you, for instance?" Elmero liked to think of himself as an extralegal mastermind.

He leaned back and steepled his fingers. "It is not outside the realm of my capabilities."

Now the big question: "Ever had occasion to arrange something like that?"

"No," he said with a slow shake of his head, "but I wouldn't be adverse to the opportunity."

"You'd help a dumb walking tumor pass itself off as Realpeople?" I couldn't believe it.

"A clone is no more a tumor than is an identical twin. And as for dumb, if your education had been limited to self-grooming and sexual techniques and little else, you'd be duller company than you already are."

"Thank you, Elmero," I said with a laugh and headed for the door.

"You're welcome, Sigmundo."

## 3.

Don't know why they named it the Central Park Complex. There was no park here. Except for moss, there wasn't much of anything green left at ground-level in the whole megalops—only on the rooftop gardens. Maybe there had been a park here once. Gone now. And who cared anyway? Don't know why I bother myself with these questions.

As we had agreed, the clone was waiting at the main entrance on Fifth. I was dodging puddles on my way across the mossy street when I spotted her squatting beside a little boy who couldn't have been older than two or three. She was holding the kid's hand, smiling and talking to him. Her face was very animated and the kid must have thought she was funny because he was laughing like she was the best thing since Joey Jose.

I knew the kid wouldn't be alone. I looked around for his guards and found them—three ten-year olds standing off to the side, eyeing the passers-by. The urchingangs liked to use the little ones for begging. I guess it was a kind of symbiosis. Illegal live births—those over and above the self-replacement quota—get left in the undergrounds. The urchingangs take them in, raise them, teach them begging, and train them in the care of the next infants to come along. A self-perpetuating cycle.

I wondered what the toddler's guardians would have done if they'd known he was holding hands with a clone. "*The clones'll getcha!*" was my mother's favorite threat whenever I acted up as a kid. Scared me for a long time. I mean, everybody knew how clones get routinely sterilized as soon as their deincubation, so it made sense for clones to steal children because they can't have any of their

own. Never heard of a real case of child-stealing, but the myth persists.

The older kids spotted me crossing toward the clone and the toddler. Must have thought I looked like trouble because they swept the little guy from the clone's grasp and spirited him away before I got within ten meters.

The clone watched them run down the street, a look of such longing on her face that I stopped in my tracks. Maybe it's not a myth—maybe clones do want kids bad enough to steal them.

We entered the park complex together. It was good to get out of the October chill and the groundlevel dampness. As we walked along the central mall of the complex, I noticed her face contorting, like spasms.

"What's wrong with you?"

Her expression immediately reverted to normal. "Nothing."

"Don't give me that. You had your face all twisted up."

She smiled—sheepishly, I thought. "Just a little game I play." She pointed ahead of her. "See this lady over on the left here? Look at her expression: like she just bit into a lemon."

I looked. True enough, the middler in question did have a puckered face. I glanced at the clone. Her face was set in an excellent lemon-sucking imitation of the lady's.

"You working at trying to pass as Realpeople?"

"No. It's fun. What do *you* do for fun, Mr. Dreyer?"

I opened my mouth to speak, then closed it. None of her business. And I realized with a spikey kind of disquiet that I couldn't think of an answer. Had to be something I did for fun.

"I don't go to Dydeetown, I can tell you that," I



said finally. Sounded lame. I was glad we came to the upchute to Bodine's subsection then.

We got off at the 27th level and went to Bodine's door. The clone keyed it open with her palm. She stepped in but stopped dead so abruptly that I stumbled against her back.

I was ready to swear at her but a glimpse of the automatically lighted room cut me off.

The place had been torn apart.

I left the clone at the door and wandered through the apartment. Lighting fixtures, cushions, furniture, the rug—any possible hiding place had been ripped open and gutted. Thorough job. *Very* thorough. Whatever the searchers wanted, they wanted bad.

"You said he was in the import-export business?"

Still mute, she nodded.

"Import-exporting what?"

"I—I don't know."

She was a rotten liar.

"I think somebody else is looking for your friend."

"Why would they . . . ?"

"You tell me."

She shook her head. "If I could, I would."

I didn't believe that, either.

"Let's get out of here," I said. "The folks who did this may come back. I don't want to be here when they do."

I hurried her out to the hall, letting the door slide closed behind us.

"You could handle them, couldn't you?"

"Of course, but it gets so messy explaining all the bodies."

That sounded sufficiently tough. Actually, I was more than a little uneasy about this whole affair. One look at that apartment and I knew there was more to this than a missing boyfriend. Didn't have

a clue as to what else was going on, but I wanted to put a few quick klicks between myself and this complex and not run into anyone unfriendly in the process. I was unarmed. Not that it would have made much difference if I was carrying—I'm not a great shot. Lousy, in fact. Lousy at hand-to-hand stuff, too. Haven't found what I'm really good at yet, but know it's not shooting and punching.

We stepped off the edge into the downchute and drifted dutifully to the rear as the draft sank us toward the lobby. We were passing the 15th floor when two burly types in loose-fitting jumpers pulled themselves down to our level using the hand rungs. I noticed a slight bulge in the left armpit area of each jumper. The pair could have been brothers except that the fellow on the right had a big red nose and the one directly to my left was missing the little finger on his right hand. It takes a certain kind of person to refuse a prosthesis for a missing piece. Not the kind of person I wanted to argue with.

I didn't like this at all. I touched the clone's arm and spoke in as conversational a tone as I could manage.

"Let's get off at the 5th and see if your mother's in."

She gave me a startled look but before she could reply, a meaty four-fingered hand clasped my left shoulder and a gravelly voice said in my ear:

"Your next stop's Ground level."

"Right," I said. "Never did like your mother, anyway."

"What's *wrong* with you?" the clone asked.

"Nothing. Just do what these nice men tell you."

She glanced right and left and suddenly looked frightened rather than curious. Which confirmed

my suspicion that she knew a lot more than she was telling.

Duped by a clone! Set up, maybe! Bad enough to have to work for one, but to be *fooled* by one . . .

As we swung out of the chute at mall-level and gravity took hold again, I took her arm like she was Realpeople. Couldn't see how anyone knowing she was a clone would help me.

"Where we going?" I asked our new escorts.

"Not far," Fourfingers replied.

They guided us across the mall toward the express chute to the roof parking lot. We glided up in silence for 80 floors. A luxury model Ortega idled a half meter off the roof, waiting. A third fellow was at the controls. We settled in and zoomed off toward where the late afternoon sun was sinking in the haze.

"Who wants to see us?" I asked in a nice relaxed tone.

Fourfingers must have been the spokesman for the trio. He gave one of his involved, long-winded answers.

"Yokomata."

"Ah," I said through a suddenly tight throat. "Yokomata. How nice."

Yokomata. A big name in the Bosyorkington megalops underworld. Not superbig like Esterwin or Lutus, but a long way from the street. I glanced pointedly at the clone.

"All this comes as a big shock to you, I suppose."

She said nothing, but her frightened eyes spoke volumes.

#### 4.

I gathered from the medium-size tyrannosaurus rex running loose in her yard that Yokomata discouraged drop-in company.

As the pilot came in low and slow over the wall, the ten-meter-long dinosaur came for us, its powerful hind legs kicking up clumps of grass as it charged. When it was almost on us, its big red wet mouth open and salivating, six-inch teeth glinting in the reddening sun, the driver kicked up the altitude with a stomach-tugging lurch. The snap of those jaws closing on air was audible through the insulated walls of the flitter.

Rednose gave the driver a none-too-gentle tap on the back of his head.

"One of these days you're gonna cut that too close."

I looked out the rear window. The tyrannosaurus followed us all the way to the house and watched with its hard black eyes until we sank out of its line of sight onto the roof. From there we walked down a short stairway and into the presence of Yokomata herself, seated behind a desk.

She studied us with her dark eyes, eyes no softer than those of her pet carnivore patrolling the yard. A big woman with a wide yellow face. Looked like a sumo wrestler who'd been on a soy-water diet for a while.

"I don't want to take up any more time with this than is necessary," she said in a silky, world-weary voice as she held up two printouts. "I know who you both are: Jean Harlow, a Dydeetown girl; and Sigmund Dreyer, a small time—very small time—investigator." She looked at me. "I want to know what you were doing in Kel Barkham's apartment."

"'Kel Barkham?'" the clone said. "That's Kyle Bodine's apartment."

Yokomata glanced at Fourfingers who nodded. "He rented it under that name a few months ago."

Yokomata kept her eyes on Fourfingers. "Ask her why she was in his apartment."

"Looking for him," the clone said before Fourfingers could open his mouth. "He was supposed to meet me Friday night but he never showed up."

"So she hired Dreyer here to find him?" Yokomata asked Fourfingers. "Is she that interested in all her customers?"

"Of course not," the clone replied in a huff, and I knew she was going to say it, but there was no way to stop her. "We're going to be married."

There was utter silence in the room for a second or two. Rednose was the first to crack; he made a choking sound, then burst out laughing. Fourfingers and the driver followed. The clone reddened and set her jaw. Only Yokomata remained impassive.

That worried me most of all. Yokomata was interrogating us herself. That meant the whereabouts of Kyle Bodine/Kel Barkham were so important to her that she didn't trust any of her underlings with the job.

As the laughter finally died away, she turned her gaze on me and the knot in my stomach tightened. But I didn't squirm; just stood there.

"And what is it that you've learned since this Dydeetown girl became your client?"

I gave her a casual shrug. "Not too much, other than the fact that your men do sloppy searches—I could've hidden a *body* in the mess they made—and that you're interested in finding this guy, too."

"Nothing more?"

"I've only been on it since after lunch. I'm good, but I'm not *that* good."

Yokomata rose from behind her desk and came toward me. She was taller than I'd originally thought.

"You're *not* good, Mr. Dreyer. The few people who've heard of you say you used to be, but now you're strictly a third-rater living off other eyes'

leavings. I wouldn't know what the clones think of you."

"They think he's honest," said the clone.

We both ignored her—Yokomata didn't recognize her presence and I wouldn't allow a clone to speak up for me.

"Over here," Yokomata said, gesturing me toward the wall. "I want to show you something."

The wall cleared as we approached, giving us a broad view of the backyard.

"Nice grass," I said. "Don't suppose you cut it yourself."

"Watch," she said. "It's almost time."

I watched the grass, watched the trees and their long shadows sway in the breeze. I was about to turn away when something darted out of the bushes near the house—brown on top, light below, thin legs, graceful neck. I'd seen pictures once. A deer. Hornless. A doe.

It zigzagged out into the yard and then froze, remained statue-like for a few heartbeats, then broke into a frenzied dash. But it didn't have a chance. A gray-green juggernaught shot into view, overtook it, and bit its head off.

I heard the clone cry out behind me as twin jets of blood sprayed into the air. The body ran on. For a few steps it looked as if it might just run off without its head. Then the legs buckled and it collapsed to the grass. The tyrannosaurus grasped the rear end of the carcass with its jaws and hoisted it free of the ground. A quick jutting move of its head, a convulsive swallow, and the doe was gone.

"Makes one think, doesn't it?" said Yokomata at my shoulder.

I nodded. "And realize that if that deer knew anything, it's not talking now. And never will."

Yokomata was silent a moment, then said, "Come with me."

We all trooped downstairs to another suite of rooms more sparsely furnished than the one above. She directed me to a cushioned recliner.

"Make yourself comfortable. I have some questions I want to ask you."

I sat—

—and was trapped. Metal cuffs popped out of the fabric and snapped around my wrists and ankles.

In a voice that sounded like she was ordering breakfast Yokomata said, "Give him a dose of Truth."

Panic shot through me and I arched myself away from the chair, trying to break those cuffs. Knew they wouldn't give, but I had to try.

"I already told you all I know!" I shouted. "This won't get you any more!"

Yokomata ignored me. She wanted to be sure I'd told her everything. If I could have come up with some way to convince her—*any* way—I would have tried it. Anything to avoid a dose of Truth. But my mind was a blank.

"What about the clone?" Rednose said.

Yokomata smiled for the first time. Her voice dripped with disdain. "Barkham gave her the wrong name and said he was going to marry her."

Enough said.

"What's happening?" the clone asked.

Fourfingers popped a drawer out of a wall and pulled a dose gun from it. He came toward me. Off to my right side I heard the clone ask:

"What are you going to do?"

I didn't want this. More than anything in the world—maybe even death—I didn't want this. And there wasn't a damn thing I could do to stop it.

Everything I had went into keeping my sphincters from letting go as he casually pressed the end of the barrel against the hollow of my shoulder and pulled the trigger. There was a *phhht!* and a sting as the drug shot through my shirt and skin.

And that was that. I slumped in the chair and tried to keep from crumbling. In a very short while everything I knew would be anyone's for the asking.

"Call me when he's ready," Yokomata said as she walked out.

The clone started toward me. "Are you all—?"

Rednose yanked her back by the arm. "Stay away from him!" Touching her seemed to give him an idea. He glanced at Fourfingers. "Isn't this perfect—time to kill and a Dydeetown girl to kill it with."

"Sounds good to me," Fourfingers said.

"I'm not open for business," the clone told them.

Rednose shoved her toward a back room. "You're gonna be."

"I'll tell my owner!" Her voice was shriller.

"Yokomata probably owns your owner!"

The three of them moved out of my field of vision. Didn't bother turning my head to watch them go. Just sat there and sweated and waited. There was some noise from the back room. Sounds of protest. And maybe a meaty slap, a cry of pain. Wasn't really listening. All I could think of was soon they'd come back and start asking me questions, and no matter what they asked—*no matter what*—I'd tell them the truth.

Eventually, Yokomata returned. She glanced around the empty room and toward the back room with annoyance, then came toward me.

"Your full name?" she asked.

The words came out of their own: "Sigmund Chando Merlandry Dreyer."



"Where do you live?"

I gave her my compartment number in Brooklyn followed immediately by my office address in the Verrazano Complex because I sometimes sleep there. I couldn't hold *anything* back!

The sound of our voices must have alerted Rednose and Fourfingers that their boss was back. As they hurried into the room, adjusting their clothes as they approached, she rewarded them with an icy glare.

"Are you married?" Yokomata asked me.

I tried to protest, but the answer forced its way out first. "Was—not anymore—and that has nothing to do with you!"

Yokomata smiled. "I think you're under enough. Now tell me: Are you withholding any information about Kel Barkham?"

"No."

"What about his aka, Kyle Bodine?"

"Nothing."

"When was the first time you ever heard the name Kel Barkham?"

"A few minutes ago."

Yokomata gave a perfunctory nod to her men. "Good enough. Bring them upstairs. *Directly* upstairs."

I began to relax. None of the questions had been personal. All Yokomata was interested in was this Barkham/Bodine character. I was relieved enough to start wondering why.

"I'll get the clone," Fourfingers said after Yokomata was gone.

"And I'll free our friend here. But first . . ." He glanced at his partner's retreating form, then back to me. A nasty smile spread over his face like slime. "'Was' married? Where's your wife? She run off 'cause you're clone-crazy?"

I tried to sing, to recite a poem, to scream and howl some gibberish, but my mouth ignored me and answered him without hesitation.

"Gone," I heard myself say. "Out Where All The Good Folks Go."

"Left you for some starfarmer, huh? Must be rough. So you just do it with clones now?"

"No."

"Who then?"

"No one."

"No one? Everyone does it with someone. Where do you get your jolts?"

Wanted to cry, wanted to shout, *Don't do this to me!* Couldn't, so I bit my upper lip until I thought my teeth were going to punch through it, but the word escaped—

—just as the clone ran up and shouted.

"Hey! That's not fair!"

Rednose's expression didn't change as he half turned and swung the back of his left hand hard against the clone's face. She staggered back and almost fell. Blood began to trickle from the corner of her mouth. The blood was very red against her too-white skin.

Rednose turned back to me. "Repeat what you said."

I was helpless to stop the word.

"Buttons."

His jaw dropped as his eyes lit with a kind of maniacal glee. "He's a buttonhead!" he shouted. "A buttonhead!"

He leaped to my side and began to paw through my hair. Didn't take him long to reach the rear midline of my scalp and find what he was looking for.

"Here it is! He's a buttonhead, all right." He

came around in front of me again. "Wifee find out and leave you? That it?

"No!"

"Why'd she fly, then?"

I tried to vomit, anything to put a stop to this, but my voice ran on without me.

"Couldn't give Maggs what she needed emotionally or physically or any other way so she took Linnie and left me eight years ago."

"So you got buttoned after, huh? What's a matter? Can't get it from the real thing? Gotta get it from a button?"

"No!" *Wasn't he ever going to stop?*

"Then *why*, buttonhead?"

"Because it's easier and neater and convenient and better and because there's no before and no after and nobody there but me and I don't have to be with anybody and I don't want to be with anybody ever again!"

I was saying things out loud to strangers that I'd never even said to myself! I'd have killed Rednose there and then if I'd had the means. But I was cuffed to a chair, unable to look anyone in the eye, and using all my will to keep from blubbering with shame.

## 5.

We were back before Yokomata's desk, only this time the clone was leaning on me. I guessed her legs were still a little wobbly from that clout in the face from Rednose. I let her lean and kept my eyes straight ahead. Wanted only one thing right now: out of here.

"... and so we're going to return you to the city," Yokomata was saying. "As far as I'm concerned, I've never heard of you and you've cer-

tainly never been here. If you wish, you may continue to search for the man you know as Kyle Bodine. I doubt there's much chance either of you will find him before I do." Her eyes narrowed. "But should you stumble across some useful information, you are to bring it directly to me, is that clear? If it leads me to him, you will collect the bounty on him. If you withhold anything . . ." She glanced toward the now opaque wall that overlooked her yard, the yard where the tyrannosaurus roamed.

We were led up to the roof and prodded into the back seat of the flitter. Fourfingers and Rednose stayed behind on the roof and left the driver to take us back by himself. No threat in a buttonhead and a Dydeetown girl, especially with a glassette partition between the front and rear sections.

As we lifted off into the darkening sky and swung east, he asked where we wanted to be dropped. I told him the Verrazano Complex for me and Dydeetown for the clone.

"I'll get off with you," she said.

"No."

"I have to talk to you."

"No!"

"Why not?"

The Truth was still in my brain and the words tripped out in a rush. "Because you've lied to me enough today and because I want to be alone and don't want you looking at me and if you ask me another question I'll throw you out the door!" My voice took on an hysterical edge toward the end.

"I'm sorry," she said in a quavering voice that crumbled into a sob. She buried her face against my shoulder and began to cry. "Why me?" I heard her moan. "Why doesn't anything ever go right for me?"

"You're getting my jumper all wet," I told her.

She pulled away. I could see tears glistening on her cheeks, running down and mixing with the blood from the corner of her mouth. There was a dark splotch of tears and blood on my front. I realized with a twinge that the blood was there because she'd tried to interfere with Rednose's peeping into my life. Much as I hated the idea, I owed her for that.

She put her head back down on my shoulder and I let it stay there. The jumpsuit was already a mess, anyway.

## 6.

Locked the compartment door behind me and slumped against it. Alone, thank the Core. Alone at last. This one room had never felt so good, so much like a home.

Had the Truth worn off? Didn't know. And it didn't matter now that I was alone. But I felt so *dirty*. Had since I'd answered those questions Rednose put to me. Scummy, rotten thing to do. He got a look into places he had no right to look, exposed areas of me never meant for the light of day . . . areas even *I* never looked into. He . . .

I thought I was going to explode . . .

But I didn't. And I wouldn't. No percentage in that.

Tore off my bloodstained jumpsuit and got into the shower stall. Hot water and enzymes sprayed over me, but not long enough. My allotment ended and the fans came on, sucking up any moisture that hadn't gone down the drain, returning it to the recirc system.

I flopped onto the rumpled bed and listened to the gray background noises typical to any large

complex. All was still in my compartment until I heard a clawed and leathery scrabbling noise in the kitchen area followed by a brittle *crack!* I lifted my head and saw Ignatz over in the corner contentedly chewing on a cockroach. Good old Ignatz—always on duty. Never let me down. The roaches had learned to feed on the poisons, to turn a deaf ear to the ultrasonic repellors, but none had yet built up a tolerance to being chewed, swallowed, and digested by a hungry iguana.

Got up and paced what little pacing room I had. Felt better but still felt rotten. Didn't want to go anywhere or be with anyone . . . not even me. *Especially me.*

The holo of Maggs and Linnie on the shelf to the left of the bed snagged me for a moment. Maggs had had it made for me before she ran off. A special holo, programmed to age the images with each passing year. Linnie had been five when Maggs took her away. She was thirteen now and probably looked almost exactly like that teenage girl on the shelf. I've spent years wondering if Maggs left it for me out of compassion or vindictiveness. If only . . .

Found myself standing by the button drawer.

Somewhere during the trip back from Yokomata's I had promised myself never to use a button again. I'd get my head debuttoned. I knew what they said: Once a buttonhead, always a buttonhead. That no matter what you do there'll always be a part of your brain that'll compare the real thing to the button and find the real thing wanting.

But I had to stop. Especially now that people like Yokomata and her men and the clone knew. Had to get debuttoned. Couldn't face again the kind of humiliation I'd faced today.

Had to stop—but not tonight. More than any other night in the past few years, I needed a button tonight. I reached in the drawer, pulled out one at random and hurried toward the bed. As usual, I took the holo of Maggs and Lynn timer off the shelf and dropped it in a drawer—didn't want them watching—and flopped down on the mattress. I snapped the button into place on my scalp and lay back, waiting for the impulses to start running down the wire into my brain.

*Slowly at first . . . light touches, little shudders of pleasure and anticipation, her on him, him on her, pleasure from both sides, building, building, encircling and encircled, searing ecstasy everywhere and in places where there was no place but which the brain found ways to interpret and pass on . . . building and building toward the inevitable that seemed so near and yet so elusive . . . building and bending the body into an arch with only heels and occiput touching the mattress . . . building forever until the final cataclysm . . .*

*. . . and then sleep.*

## 7.

I was in Elmero's again before noon. Much of yesterday seemed far away, but some parts lingered, clustering around the button at the back of my head. Got the usual nods from the crowd of regulars at the bar. No jeers or catcalls or cries of "Buttonhead!" Don't know what I'd been expecting. Because a few people knew it seemed like everyone must know.

Elmero smiled his awful smile as I came through the door. "More gold?"

"Soon maybe. Right now I'm looking for info on a guy named Kyle Bodine—ever heard of him?"

"Never."

"How about Kel Barkham?"

He laughed. "You looking, too?"

"What y'mean, 'too'?"

"At 50K dead and 100K alive, everybody's looking for Barkham!"

I'd forgotten about the bounty. Big bounty. Yokomata wanted him real bad.

"What did he do to Yokomata anyway?"

Elmero shrugged. "Nobody knows for sure, but I've heard it had something to do with a Zem deal."

That figured. Yokomata was reputedly big in the drug trade and Zemmelar was the latest rage.

Like to try Zem some day, but I've got enough problems for now. Already hooked on buttons and Zem is the most potent, addictive, tightly-controlled synthetic narcotic in Occupied Space. But when I'm dying, that's the way I want to go. After all, that was what it was made for—so the terminally ill could spend their last days and weeks in pain-free, euphoric hallucinations. No one was surprised, though, when Zem addicts popped up all over Occupied Space within a few standard years after its release. Zemmelar analogs were now manufactured on lots of planets, but Styx Corp. Zem from Earth was reputedly the best.

"Tell me what you know about Barkham."

That smile again. "It'll cost."

"If I find him, you get 25 percent of whatever I get. Consider it an investment."

"Make it fifty."

"Too much. I can find out whatever you can tell me on the street."

"Take you forever."

He was right. I shrugged. If I got to Barkham first, half of fifty or a hundred thousand Solar



Credits was more than I'd ever seen at once in my entire life. The money wasn't my primary concern, anyway. Yokomata had called me "a third-rater." She was going to eat those words.

"Deal."

"How do I know I'll ever see you again if you get the bounty?"

I offered him the only collateral I had:

"My word."

He stretched his considerable length. "With anybody else I'd laugh. But you, Sig . . . deal." He leaned forward. "Hear: Barkham came up from the streets through the ranks of Yokomata's organization and has been Yokomata's right-hand man for the past two years. He's got a reputation for dealing dirty whenever he can, even when there's no good reason. He *likes* working that way. But if you try to deal him the same way, nobody ever hears from you again."

"Nice guy."

"Nice sadist. He was a perfect first-in-command for Yokomata, kept everything running smooth, kept everyone in line—until he doubled Yokomata."

This was the guy who got Harlow a greencard and was going to run off to the outworlds with her? Were we talking about the same guy?

"How'd he do that?"

Elmero sighed. "Been trying to find out. Not easy. Yokomata's clamped a real lid on the affair—which means she could look real bad if the details hit the street. What I do know is this: Yokomata's crew stole a hundred vials of Zem concentrate right off the production line."

I had been leaning up against the front of his desk. Now I took a seat. A hundred vials of concentrate! It could be diluted again and again before it hit the veins of the addicts.

"How much is that worth?"

"Millions at user level, but word is that Yokomata was wholesaling it for a quick return. And Barkham was handling the sale."

"And he's gone."

Elmero nodded. *"With the Zem. And the one or two million payoff from the sale."*

No wonder Yokomata had posted a big reward.

"No sign of him since?"

Elmero shook his head.

"How about Central Data?"

"I had a contact there trace his credit trail—something I'm sure Yokomata's already done—but Barkham hasn't used his thumb since Friday."

Which meant he was using barter to move around. Only a clone-scale idiot would use his thumb on the run. Anytime he bought or sold something, the transaction would be recorded in Central Data—where, when, how much, and with whom. One of the unsung benefits of Earth's cashless economy. The only way around it was barter. And bartering would be easy if you had a hundred vials of Zem concentrate within reach. He could go anywhere. He could *be* anywhere by now.

So why the charade with the Dydeetown girl?

Maybe I'd never know.

"Anything else you can tell me?"

"That's it. Except there's a whisper about The Man From Mars being involved in the deal."

I laughed. "Sure! And I'm a Boedekker heir!"

Elmero shrugged. "You asked me what I'd heard, not what I thought was sensible."

I got up and headed for the door.

"Thanks, Elm."

*"De nada—as long as you remember my cut."*

## 8.

I was back in my office, sipping a cup of tay. I'd just let Ignatz loose to start gobbling up the cockroaches when Harlow walked into my office. I saw how the left side of her mouth was swollen and discolored and got a queasy tug inside.

"I've got to talk to you!" she blurted, her words tumbling over each other. "It's important! It's about Kyle!"

"Sure," I said. "Sit down."

She stood and stared at me, obviously taken aback. "I thought you'd throw me out."

"Now why would I do that? Just because you lied to me about your boyfriend? Don't be silly!"

Knowing that she knew about me made me want to crawl under the desk. But I couldn't let her see any of that. Had my position to maintain. Didn't want to feel lower than a clone. So I washed out yesterday. It never happened. That was the only way I could sit in front of her.

"I promised him I'd never tell anyone what I knew about him. But I'm going to tell you everything now."

"You mean that his real name's 'Kel' and that the 'exporting firm' he works for is really Yokomata?"

"His real name's Kyle Bodine—and he works for the C.A."

Almost choked on my tay. Kel Barkham working for the Crime Authority—this I had to hear.

"Sit down and tell me all about it. *All* about it."

She sat and began talking at once.

"Kyle is a C.A. agent. He's been working his way up through the ranks of the Yokomata organization for years, waiting for the right moment to turn the whole gang in."

It was all I could do to keep from laughing in her face—clones are so dumb.

"Why didn't he?" I said. "I understand he's been Yokomata's right-hand man for years."

"He was waiting for the right moment. And then an undreamed-of opportunity presented itself."

"He met you."

I've never thought of myself as a subtle sort, but she flashed me a very genuine smile as the remark *whooshed* right by her left ear.

"Oh, how nice of you to say that! But the truth is that he had an opportunity to actually catch The Man From Mars."

I stiffened in my chair. The Man From Mars—this was the second time in as many tenths that his name had come up. I didn't take to the idea of the most notorious smuggler in Occupied Space having a hand in this.

But it made a sort of sense. Earth-produced Zem had a premium value on the Sol worlds, and a triple premium on the outworlds—except on someplace like Tolive where I'd heard it was legal and could be bought over-the-counter. Who better to get it off-planet than The Man From Mars?

I had a bad feeling that I was getting further and further out of my depth here. But I couldn't stop now.

"Where do you fit into all of this?"

"I told you: We were going to be married and move—"

"—Out Where All The Good Folks Go. I know. But didn't you play any part in the plot?"

"Why . . . yes. How'd you know?"

"Lucky guess. I'm good at lucky guesses. What did you do for Barkham?"

"Bodine—Kyle Bodine."

"Whatever. Talk."

"I delivered a package to The Man From Mars for him."

"You *saw* him?" So far as I knew, *nobody* had ever seen The Man From Mars.

"Not—not exactly. I heard a voice. It told me to put the package down and go. So I went."

"Where and when was this?"

"Friday morning. In a cave on the Maine Coastal Preserve."

"And when did you last see Bar—Bodine?"

"That morning."

"And he was supposed to meet you Friday night?"

She nodded. "We were supposed to leave for the outworlds right away—Kyle said his life in Sol System wouldn't be worth a soupbowl in freefall after he turned in The Man From Mars. We had tickets for the Friday night shuttle."

"How come you waited until Wednesday to come to me? Why didn't you go to the C.A. first?"

"I did. But they said they'd never heard of Kyle. Which was what I expected—Kyle told me his cover was so deep that only a privileged handful in the government even knew he existed."

"Fewer than that even, I'm sure," I said.

She nodded. "Probably. But I was getting so worried when there was no news release from the C.A. about the capture of The Man From Mars . . . I thought something might have gone wrong. And since he told me never to go to the Officials about him, I came to you."

"My lucky day. Can you find your way back to that cave?"

"Yes. I have the co-ords written down."

That startled me. "Clones can't write." Actually, most Realpeople can't read or write, either. But I'd never heard of a clone who could.

She drew herself up. "I'm teaching myself. For Kyle."

I felt a wave of disgust. Poor dumb thing. Led on and lied to by this hood, teaching herself to read just for him, thinking he was going to take her to the outworlds. Pitiful. Real people shouldn't treat clones like that . . .

But on the other hand, what if he'd been straight with her? If he did work for the C.A., he'd have to get off-planet real fast after blowing his cover. And being with the C.A., he'd be in a position to wrangle a nice new greencard for anyone, even a clone.

Curiouser and curiouser.

"Please find him for me!"

"All right," I said. "I'll stick with this, but only on the condition that you've told me everything you know."

"I have."

"*Everything?*"

"Everything."

I believed her. But then, I'd believed her last time.

"Give me your greencard."

Her reaction was instantaneous: She clutched at her belt-purse. "No!"

"It may help me trace him."

"You think so?"

"Definitely."

Not definitely, really, but I had a feeling I could learn a lot about Kyle Bodine/Kel Barkham/Whoever when I learned a little more about Harlow's greencard.

"I don't know . . ."

"It might be important."

"It's already important to me. It's . . ." Her lower lip trembled. "It may be all I have left of him."

"And it may be the key to finding him."

She thought about that for a while, then: "All right." She fished it out and handed it over to me like she was entrusting me with her only child. "But take good care of it. It means a lot to me."

"Sure. Guard it with my life."

## 9.

"Check this out for me, will you?"

Elmero took Harlow's greencard and looked it over front and back.

"Check it out how?"

"Want to know if it's real."

"Easy enough." He rode his chair over to his all-purpose console.

I'd used the excuse of renting a flitter to get away from Harlow. Told her I'd pick her up in half a twentieth on the roof of my office complex.

Instead, I'd come to Elmero's.

"Fake," he said, pulling the card out of a slot and sailing it across the room at me.

"That bad, huh?" I had a feeling Elmero saw more than his share of greencards, real and otherwise.

"Worst fake I ever saw. Too thick, for one thing, and they didn't even bother to encode it with a genotype."

*No genotype on the card . . .* and it figured that if Barkham hadn't bothered to make a decent fake of a card, he certainly hadn't made any changes in Central Data. Poor Harlow—that dumb, trusting clone hadn't even bothered to try the card out. She was walking around thinking she could pass for Realpeople, but was still a clone as far as Central Data was concerned.

"By the way," Elmero said. "Heard something new on Barkham. Word is he tried to sell ten vials

of the Zem to Lutus on Friday. And Lutus, being a fond, trusting competitor, called Yokomata to ask her what was up. The bounty on Barkham's head hit the air half a tenth later."

Interesting. I was collecting a lot of information but none of it was piecing together. Barkham was looking more and more like groundlevel slime, nothing like the clone pictured him. I figured I had nothing to lose by asking a stupid question.

"Say, Elm . . . any chance of Kel Barkham being a C.A. agent?"

If Elmero was merely ugly when he smiled, he was hideous when he laughed.

"*That* motherless goon? If Barkham's C.A., so am I!"

I tucked the worthless greencard away and stood up.

"But about that card," he said, still smiling. "For what it's worth, there *is* something encoded on it. Nothing to do with greencard information, but there's something. I can find out what if you want."

"Maybe later. Right now I need some firepower."

"You? You can't hit the side of the Verrazano Complex at fifty meters. You're better off running."

"I know. But I may not get the chance. I need an edge."

"This have anything to do with looking for Barkham?"

I nodded. "It might."

He rubbed a long-fingered hand along his jaw. "Guess I'd better protect my investment. Got just the thing for you. Strip to the waist . . ."



## 10.

Once we had settled into the cab of the rented flitter, Harlow wanted her greencard back right away but I told her I needed it just a little bit longer. She didn't like the idea but I didn't give her much choice.

The console asked for our destination and Harlow handed me the coordinates she'd written on a slip of paper. I thrust it back at her and told her to read them off. Told her I probably couldn't read her handwriting. Which was true. Also true that I couldn't read most writing unless the words were few and simple and block printed—never learned. Great with numbers but reading was a useless skill. Like most people, I had no need for it. But here I was with a clone who could read. Saw no reason to let her know I couldn't.

She read them off, the flitter rose, and we were on our way.

Except for my skin was itching me under the wrist contacts for the chest zapper Elm had fitted me with, it was a comfortable trip. We didn't say much, and when we did I made sure we avoided the subject of yesterday's stay at Yokomata's. She talked about some of the books she had read recently. I wondered if she was showing off or just trying to make conversation. For a dumb clone she seemed to know a lot.

Two tenths after leaving Brooklyn, we were hovering over the Maine Coastal Preserve. Can't imagine why anyone would want to live in Maine. Cold rocks, cold wind, cold water. And trees, lots of trees. The megalops hasn't crept this far north and probably never will. The cave was below—a black hole in the coastal rocks, well above the tide line. I settled the flitter down and turned to her.

"Once more: What did you do here?"

"I took the box Kyle gave me and carried it down to the cave."

"How big was the box?"

"About this big." She measured out a 25-by-10 centimeter space in the air—just the right size to hold a hundred amps of Zem. "I took it in and a voice from somewhere in the dark told me where to put it. I put it and left."

"And that was it? Nothing more?"

"Nothing. I got back into the flitter that brought me here, let it take me back to L-I Port where I was supposed to meet Kyle for the shuttle out."

"And he never showed."

She shook her head sadly. "No."

I was beginning to get the picture, but I needed to explore the cave to confirm a suspicion that been growing all day. I left Harlow in the flitter—I'd brought a coat, she hadn't—and made my way to the cave mouth with the flit's utility lamp under my arm. The salt-stinking wind off the water was like a vib blade against my face. The wide-openness of the Maine coast left me feeling naked and unprotected. I was glad to get into the comfortable confines of the cave.

Didn't take me long to find him. Just followed the whimpers.

Not sure how they did it to him. Must be something the Martian colonists developed. I knew The Man From Mars was involved—he'd left his mark scratched in the dirt next to Barkham's remains: a big circle with four little circles lined up inside along the equator.

Only Barkham's head remained untouched. It sat upright, open-mouthed and glassy-eyed on a transparent box, blinking in the glare of my light.

Except for the spinal cord and major nerve

trunks, his torso was completely gone: skin, muscles, bones, guts, all eaten away or chewed away or melted away, I don't know which. But *gone*. The lower halves of his arms and legs still had flesh on them but were connected to the rest of him by nerve bundles alone. All the nerves seemed to have been coated with something to keep them viable and then stretched to their limit over the rocks and debris on the cave floor. Where his chest had once been now sat a heart-lung machine, hissing softly as it drew air in and out of the tube jammed into the lower stump of his windpipe, chugging softly as it pumped bright red blood up through his arteries and drew the darker stuff down from his jugulars.

He yelped with every step I took toward him. At first I thought he was afraid I was one of his torturers come to do more damage, but then realized he could *feel* every little vibration I made as I approached across the cave floor, and each and every one was translated into pain for him.

Came up and looked him in the eyes. Whatever kind of mind he'd had was pretty much gone. Having his entire nervous system laid bare to the chill Maine air had pushed him into mental sub-space.

His pupils constricted as he looked up into the light.

"God?" he said in a voice so hoarse from screaming it was barely recognizable as human. "Is that . . . you, God?"

I realized he couldn't see me behind the light. He was talking to the light, timing his words with the exhalations of the machine sitting below the stump of his neck.

"Yeah. God. That's me."

"Can I die . . . now God? . . . I've had enough take me . . . God I'm ready."

"Not yet. First you answer a few questions."

His eyes squeezed shut. "After I'm . . . dead God after . . . I'm dead."

"Now." I didn't give him time to protest again. "You shorted The Man From Mars, didn't you?"

His voice keened, his eyes rolled, his face contorted in a spasm of horror at the mention of that name. I let it run its course.

"Didn't you?"

It looked like he was trying to nod but couldn't with his neck muscles detached from the rest of him.

"Yes but on . . . only a few . . . vials."

"So he came for the rest of it."

A sob: "Gave it . . . to him."

"But still he did this to you."

Another attempt at a nod, then a wail. "*Lesson!*"

Right. A good lesson. The Man From Mars already had a ruthless reputation, and when word about this got out, no one would *ever* try to short him again.

"So he winds up with the Zem *and* his money."

"Not money . . . thinks Yoko . . . has it."

Which meant that as far as The Man From Mars was concerned, the deal was done. Yokomata's lieutenant had tried to short him—Barkham had probably slipped ten dummy vials into the case—but that had all been taken care of. The Man From Mars had all the Zem he had paid for, and was no doubt well on his way to Mars at this very moment.

But Yokomata *didn't* have the payment. She'd never received it. And she wanted it before word got out about her Number One Man doubling her. She'd lose lots of face if she got left with no Zem, no payment, and no Barkham.

"Where is the payment?"

"Don't you . . . know, God?"

"Of course. But it's good for you to confess these sins. Cleanses the soul."

"In L I . . . Port locker . . . had it . . . routed there."

"And the key?"

A grunt—an attempt at a laugh? "Hidden where . . . only you can . . . find it!"

"Where's that?"

"Not of . . . your making."

Then he began to gurgle and roll his eyes. The more I asked, the more he rolled and gurgled. I was tempted to flick a finger against one of his exposed nerves to get his attention but didn't want to touch him.

I changed the subject. "What about the Dydeetown girl?"

The eyes widened. "Truly you . . . are God!"

"We've already established that. Where did she fit in?"

His upper lip curled into a sneer. "Meatbag clone . . . too stu . . . pid to know."

"Yeah. You used her to make the drop for you here while you were trying to sell the ten stolen vials to Lutus. Told her you were going to marry her. She loves you."

He made a noise like, "*Glah!* . . . stupid clone . . . going to . . . leave her stan . . . ding at the gate."

I said nothing.

"God can . . . I die . . . now?"

I turned and started walking back toward the cave mouth. "I don't think so. You've still got some time coming to you."

His voice rose to a shrill squeak, see-sawing up

and down with the in-and-out of the machine's respirations.

*"Youuuu proooooomiiiiised!"*

I stopped. I *had* promised, hadn't I. As he wailed and keened, I turned and walked back toward his set-up, careful to make sure every footstep landed as hard as it could. I was reaching for the power switch when I heard Harlow's voice cry out behind me.

*"No—don't!"*

So I didn't. I watched the look of horror on her face as she stumbled forward. I was afraid she was going to fall apart completely. She had her fist crammed halfway into her mouth and her whole body was shuddering like a vaporbrain in withdrawal. But she held up until she reached the heart-lung machine, then crumpled to her knees in front of it. Her voice was a low moan.

*"Kyle-Kyle-Kyle! What've they done to you? What've they *done*!"*

But Barkham had finally gone over the mental edge. Maybe it was the sound of her voice that finally pushed him over. He said nothing, just rolled his eyes and made squeaky noises.

I heard her begin to retch and pulled her away.

*"There's nothing you can do for him now."*

*"I can stop the machine!"*

*"I was just about to do that when you came in. Stand over there while I—"*

*"No! I'll do it. It's the least I can do for him."*

That was a laugh. *"You don't owe him anything."*

She turned on me like some sort of wild thing. *"I *do*! He's the only Realperson who ever really cared for me and treated me decent. I owe him *everything*!"*

I said nothing. I just stood there and bit my tongue while she went over and reverently pushed

in the power switch. She was irrational on the subject and probably too dumb to see the truth even if I drew her a picture. So I dropped it. I watched her turn away as Barkham's face turned a dusky color and went through its final spasms.

"It's over," I said after a while.

She stuck her chin out and strode ahead of me, leading the way back to the flutter, seemingly oblivious to the cold and the wide open spaces.

After a long silence during which I told the console "Home" and we took to the air, she spoke without looking at me:

"Did you see what they *did* to him?"

Of course I had seen. That wasn't what she wanted to know.

"Yeah. Too bad. I was real torn up by it."

She turned to me. "Don't you ever feel *anything*?"

"None of your business, but I'll tell you this: I don't feel anything for guys like Barkham."

"Because he was going to marry a clone?"

"That has nothing to do with it."

"How about for me, then? You know me. We've been together all afternoon and you know how I felt about him. How about feeling something for me?"

"As a rule, I tend not to feel too much for clones, either."

"How about for your wife, then? Ever feel much for her? Or your daughter? You ever feel anything for *anyone*?"

I did feel something then: anger. I wanted to hit her. She had no right even *knowing* about Maggs and Linnie, let alone speaking about them. But I bottled it up. I'm a good bottler. Dangerous to show what's going on inside. People get to know your weak spots, your vulnerabilities. They can get to you then.

"That's me," I said lightly. "Feel-nothing Sig."

"Maybe that's why she left you behind when she went Out Where All The Good Folks Go. Maybe she wanted someone who's *alive* rather than a walking corpse."

"Maybe." The clone was just trying to get a rise out of me. I leaned back and looked straight ahead at the darkening landscape.

"Well I'll tell you this, Feel-nothing Sig: I'm going home and scraping up every thing of value I can find and I'm getting a ticket on the first shuttle out tomorrow morning."

"Why not tonight, if you're in such a big hurry?" I said to the windshield.

"I have to work tonight and I don't want my owner looking for me. But I'll be far into subspace before she misses me tomorrow night."

"You *can't* buy a ticket. Clones don't have credit."

Her smile was humorless. "How long do you think it'll take me to barter someone into buying me one?"

"No Realperson will buy a shuttle ticket for a clone. It'd be like leaving your name and address at the scene of a felony."

"I have my—*Hey!* You've still got my greencard." She stuck out her hand. "Give it back right now!"

"I don't have it with me."

"*WHAT?*" If she hadn't been belted into her seat, I believe she would have leaped upon me.

"Don't worry—it's safe! I told you—" I was thinking as fast as I could—"I left it with someone to see if it could lead us to Barkham. Didn't think we'd find him up here!"

That seemed to mollify her a bit, but not much. "I want that card back, Mr. Dreyer, and I want it soon."



"Don't worry. I'll get it back to you before the first shuttle tomorrow morning."

But I was going to put it to good use before then.

"You'd better. Because I don't intend to be anybody's property after tomorrow. I'll be a free citizen of the outworlds. And nobody had better try to stop me." She looked at me defiantly, as if daring me to protest.

"Fine with me," I told her. "Means one less clone on Earth."

She leaned back in her chair. "Maybe I'll run into your wife out there. Should I say hello for you?"

I didn't reply. I simply stared straight ahead and whistled through my clenched teeth.

## 11.

I dropped her off in Dydeetown. Not a town, really, just an old, old building on a short strip of Manhattan along the East River. Not a very imaginative building—big rectangular slab with lots of windows. Striking at night with all the red lights in the windows. I learned a lot about Dydeetown during my last search. Found out it was named Aphrodite Village before my time. Guess that somehow degenerated into what we call it today. And long before that it had been called the U.N., whatever that means.

I headed due east along the length of Long Island for the spaceport that took up most of its eastern end. I glided into the third level of the short term lot and went directly for the Safe Storage Service.

I'd done a lot of thinking during the long silent flight back and had Barkham's scheme pretty well figured out now. A neat scheme, one he would

have got away with if he hadn't been so greedy. Or was it greed? Elmero had mentioned Barkham's reputation for burning everybody just for the fun of it. Almost a matter of principle with him. Maybe he hadn't been able to resist one burn too many.

I figured it ran something like this: As Yokomata's Number One Man and the guy in charge of the Zem sale, Barkham had free rein in setting up the deal. He took his time, allowing for The Man From Mars to take possession of the Zem where the smuggler would be comfortably anonymous—the Maine coast, for instance. Meanwhile, Barkham had rented space in the Safe Storage Service at L-I Port and was pseudonymously courting a Dydeetown girl who could make the drop for him in Maine and then be forgotten. The Man From Mars would test the Zem concentrate, find out it was the real thing, then authorize transfer of the payment from his unit in the spaceport Safe Storage Service to Barkham's. The only possible hitch after that would be picking up the payment from the Storage Service—someone might be watching for him. My guess was that Barkham planned to have his Dydeetown girl pick it up and bring it to him. And then he'd leave her behind in the spaceport holding her useless greencard as she was led away for trying to emigrate under a false identity.

And it would have worked too if he'd been satisfied with limiting his dirty doings to Yokomata and the clone. But no, he had to try and pull one off on The Man From Mars as well. The million or two Solar credits worth of gold—I assumed it was gold—coming his way wasn't enough. He had to spice it up by short-counting The Man From Mars. If I were trying something like that I'd situate the blank vials in a circle around the center of the box,

figuring anyone doing random samples would select from the very center or the periphery.

I had to hand it to Barkham: He was either driven or insane or the cojoniest guy there ever was. On top of everything else he had the audacity to try and sell the pilfered vials to Yokomata's biggest competitor—an added insult to his boss.

But somehow it all went wrong. The Man From Mars found out he'd been cheated; he caught up with Barkham, retrieved the missing vials, dealt with the cheater in his own inimitable way, and headed home. He wouldn't hang around. He had his Zem, and he probably figured Yokomata had the payment.

But Yokomata didn't have the payment, and had no idea where to look.

I did. And I had the key to Barkham's unit—right inside Jean's phony, too-thick greencard. Why Barkham hid it there I'll never know. Maybe to keep it off his person and safe—he knew Jean would treasure it—or maybe the irony of it appealed to the same kinks in his wires that made him want to cheat everybody he knew. I didn't know and didn't care. I had the card and that was all that mattered at the moment.

I stepped up to the counter of the Safe Storage Service. The card slipped easily into the slot and I waited for the contents of the designated storage unit to arrive. A standard packing case about the size of my head popped out of a chute a meter or so to my left. As casually as I could, I picked it up, anticipating the extraordinary weight and not showing it. I tucked it under my arm and headed back to the short term lot.

The weight was pretty much what I had expected: about 20 kilos. Just about the same weight Lennie had been when Maggs took her away. Had

Maggs carried her along this path to the shuttle ramp, telling her about the exciting ride ahead and why her Daddy wasn't there?

I shifted the weight in my arms. Yeah, my five-year old Linnie had weighed just this much when she was taken from me. Started thinking of how it had felt to hold her, and then thought of all the times I hadn't held her when I could have and should have, all the missed opportunities, all the too-busy, shouldered-aside chances to show her how much she was loved by and how much she meant to an emotionally inarticulate fool who pretended to be a father and a husband; chances that would never come again. Never, never, never—

Stopped and waited for my vision to clear. Didn't know what was wrong with me. Thought I'd shut Linnie away in my mental closet, the one with the foolproof lock that only failed sometimes in the wee hours of the morning when it popped open and let out all the things I hide away to make everyday life bearable.

I tucked all the loose ends back in—I'm good at that—and hurried on.

Soon as I had the flutter airborne again, I opened the package. Lots of little black statuettes of Alano Alvarez, the vid star, each about eight centimeters high, forty of them arranged in two doubled-decker rows of ten. By their weight I knew they were gold. By my calculations, forty half-kilo pieces of gold came to a bit over a million and a half Solar credits. I swallowed hard. A *lot* of credit. More than I'd ever thought I'd hold in my lap.

Where to go? That was the question. Who did this belong to? By rights, the Styx Corporation had first call since it was the producer of the stolen Zem concentrate. But I couldn't go to them—too many difficult questions to answer. I could

play the old finders-keepers game but that didn't seem too smart. Yokomata would come calling if I suddenly got rich. Best to turn it over to her and have done with the whole affair. At least I'd collect the 50K bounty and maybe even a bonus for returning the gold too.

But I wanted to test the water first—see what sort of mood Yokomata was in before I dropped by with my little present. My office was closest. I headed there.

The roof of the Verrazano Complex was after-hours quiet at this time of night. I had carried the box half way to the downchute when a too-familiar voice stopped me.

"What you got there, Buttonhead?"

I looked to my left and saw Rednose, Fourfingers and Yokomata's driver standing shoulder-to-shoulder in front of a luxury Ortega. And sitting with her stumpy legs dangling out its right rear door was Yokomata.

I didn't like the looks on their faces—like lower-level dogs coming upon a wounded cat. I hoped my voice wouldn't squeak.

"Just going to call you!" I said to Yokomata, ignoring Rednose.

"Really?" she said. "Whatever for?"

"Found Barkham. Wanted to collect my bounty" I hefted the box. "Found this, too. Figured you were looking for it."

"There wouldn't happen to be some statues of Alano Alvarez in there, would there? I'm terribly fond of his singing."

"So am I," I said, trying to keep the conversation light. "I was hoping you'd let me keep one of the statues as a reward for returning all forty of them—a total of twenty kilos in weight."

The heavies stirred at mention of the weight.

"Think of all the buttons you could buy with that, Buttonhead," Rednose said.

Yokomata continued: "And you *were* into the process of delivering it to me, weren't you?" Her tone was ominous.

"Of course."

"Strange. It appeared to me that you were going to your office.

"Going to call first."

A smile that would have looked at home on the face of her pet tyrannosaurus: "How polite. By the way, how was my trusted associate, Mr. Barkham, when you found him?"

Her smile broadened as I described his final circumstances.

Then she said, "Put the box down."

"And put your hands over your head," said Rednose.

I did as I was told and when I straightened up I saw the three of them had blasters out and pointed at my mid-section.

"No sudden moves," Fourfingers said.

Rednose stepped forward, a smirk on his face. At first I thought he had a blaster in each hand, then I saw the one in his left was the dose gun, the one loaded with Truth.

"I don't think we have to worry about Buttonhead, here. He doesn't carry. Do you, Buttonhead?" He did a quick frisk of my flanks and found nothing. "First thing we do right now is make sure you're telling the truth about Kel. After that, maybe it'll be interesting to try what The Man From Mars did to Kel on you."

He raised the dose gun. I had to move now or maybe lose my chance forever. I joined the two contacts on the outer aspect of each of my wrists and my shirt front exploded. A staccato series of

bluefire energy bolts sprayed out in a horizontal arc, riddling the three, Rednose first and then the pair behind him, sending them twisting, spinning, writhing to the roof surface.

I yanked my wrists apart—seemed they'd been joined for minutes but it had only been a matter of a heartbeat or two—and started toward Yokomata's Ortega. Couldn't see much, what with the dark, the meaty-smelling steam rising from the corpses, the smoke from my scorched jumpsuit front, and the blotchy afterimages of the bolts from the chest zapper. My foot struck something and it skittered in front of me with a metallic scrape. Without slowing I stooped and picked it up: somebody's blaster. Dimly saw Yokomata ahead of me, moving within the frame of her flutter door. She could have been trying to get away or reaching for a blaster of her own. I took no chances. I fired off a bolt into the air and shouted.

"Not another move, lady!"

She froze and glared at me as I came up to her. She was unarmed.

I had her.

What was I going to do with her?

## 12.

We were airborne, low over the sluggish surface of the East River. Dydeetown's rectangle of red lights sparkled on our left. The flutter was on slow autocruise which would keep it moving along the present traffic lane at a leisurely pace. Yokomata sat stiffly in the other front seat. Behind us in the rear section lay her three dead thugs. I'd made her pull the bodies aboard. I was strangely calm about killing them. I'd never killed before, but for the life of me I couldn't dredge up any remorse. Self-defense

and various other sorts of dreck, but to be frank, it seemed like the chest zapper had done it, not me. Felt removed from the whole incident. And if I wanted to dig way down into my gut, I was *glad* they were dead—especially Rednose.

I sat facing Yokomata now, blaster in hand, the Truth dose gun on my lap.

A bad situation all the way around. Wasn't sure how to get out of it so I'd been talking to her in a matter-of-fact tone, playing it by ear, but to no avail. She hadn't uttered a word since I'd cut loose with my chest zapper. I had to break through if I was going to get anywhere. And then it occurred to me how.

"What's your procedure for unwanted bodies?"

No reply.

I shrugged and gestured toward the rear door with the barrel of my blaster. "Then we'll improvise. Get back there and toss one of them into the river. Then we'll find a deserted spot in Brooklyn for the second, and in Manhattan for the third."

"Don't be an idiot!" she said.

*Contact.*

I knew the last thing she wanted—next to being blasted herself—was to have the bodies of her toughies found all over Central Bosyorkington.

"Got a better idea?"

She gave me a level stare. "You saw a demonstration in my yard yesterday."

The dinosaur! I'd forgotten all about it! The perfect garbage disposal. I told the console "Home at max." The Ortega rose toward the upper lanes with a lurch and soon we were streaking northwest.

"Now," I said to her, "let's talk some business. I'm willing to forget your attempted double-cross back on the roof. You forget your three dead men, and we'll start off even again."



She said nothing, merely stared at me with those reptilian eyes.

I gestured to the sack of gold statuettes on the floor between us. "In return for finding your money and getting it to you, I expect a ten percent reward. Add that to what you owe me for finding Barkham dead, and it comes to 200 kilocredits—roughly five of the statuettes. We part friends, both of us richer."

She continued to stare at me and I began to get worried. I did *not* want Yokomata for an enemy. She had a reputation for holding a grudge. I'd be looking over my shoulder every minute, waiting for my head to get vaporized.

"Sounds reasonable," she said, finally.

I did not show my relief. Nor my elation. I'd been ready to let her haggle me down to 100k.

I stuck out my hand. She took and shook.

"Deal."

We made small talk the rest of the trip. She seemed particularly interested in the manner of Barkham's death. I had a feeling she would have liked to have been there to see it herself. She seemed relaxed and affable, but I detected something ugly beneath the surface.

And then the flitter stopped: We were over the Yokomata estate. All was dark below. As Yokomata looked out the window on her left, I picked up the dose gun on my lap and gave her a good air-propelled shot of Truth in her upper arm, right through the fabric of her blouse.

She spun around and grabbed at the injection site. "Wha . . . ?"

I smiled. "Just getting even."

I put the flitter on hold at ten meters and popped open the rear door on Yokomata's side. There came a breathy hissing from below, interrupted by loud

clacking sounds, like jaws with dozens of giant teeth snapping together with bone-crunching force. I made her push the bodies of her dead thugs out the door one by one.

She didn't seem to mind. And as the last tumbled down into that hungry darkness I said to her: "Yoko, old girl, tell me true: Did you really mean it when you said you'd let bygones be bygones?"

As her head swung around toward me her face became a mask of unfathomable rage and hatred. Spittle flew at me as she screamed.

"You putrid lump of street dung! Do you think I'd let you get away with killing my men and taking a percentage of my payment for the Zem? I'd rather sell my ass in Dydeetown! The first thing I'm going to do when I get inside is send a hit squad after you and that clone! You'll both be dead before sunrise!"

I pointed the blaster at her face.

"Jump."

Her eyes reflected the horror she felt. She could hide nothing.

"At least you've got a chance if you jump," I said. "That's more than you were going to give me."

She looked out the door into that hungry darkness, then looked back at me. If she hadn't had the Truth in her, she might have caught me off guard. But her face told the whole story. I put a deep penetrating blast into her upper chest as she started to leap at me. She reeled back and fell out the door.

Didn't wait to hear the chomping from below. Closed the door by hitting the "All Secure" button, then told the console the coordinates of my compartment building. I had to get a clean intact

jumper before I went to Elmero's to turn all this gold into more manageable credit.

### 13.

I saw Jean before she saw me. Didn't recognize her at first, what with her hair dyed a mousey brown and all. She was standing off to the side of the chute to the shuttle ramp with all her belongings in a single bag on the floor beside her, her face a tight, anxious mask as she scanned the crowd. Then she spotted me and her expression relaxed.

"Afraid I wouldn't show?"

"I knew you would," she said with conviction. "Just afraid you'd be late. I'm on the next shuttle."

"Where to?"

"The Bernardo de la Paz platform."

"Oh." That had been Maggs' first stop. It had taken me a while to trace her itinerary, but I finally learned—

"Have you got it?"

"Wha?" I came back to the present. "Oh, yeah. Here." I had the greencard in my hand. I passed it over to her.

She grabbed it away like a starving man grabs food, and sighed like he would with his first bite. "Thank you. Thank you, thank you."

"Means a lot, huh?"

A little girl smile: "Oh, yes!"

"Like what?"

"Somebody believed in me enough to think I could pass as Realpeople."

"How do you know it's not a fake? How do you know you won't get red-lighted when they check your genotype as you try to pass through Emigration?" She looked insulted. "How do you know he wasn't going to go up to the screening area and

leave you standing there with the alarms going off while he boarded the shuttle and headed out?"

"I just *know*!" she said in shocked tones. I guess the thought had never occurred to her.

"He was a crook."

"No! He was an agent . . ."—her face clouded—  
". . . and the C.A. will catch up with whoever did such a thing to one of their top men! He believed in me and I believe in this card. It's all I have left of him."

Dumb. *Dumb*! I had to tell her the truth, whether she believed me or not.

"He was a crook. That's how he got these."

I handed her a small sack containing ten of the little Alano Alvarez statues. After almost toppling over with the unexpected weight, she looked inside, then looked at me, questioning.

"They were Barkham's and—"

"Bodine—his real name was Kyle Bodine."

"Whatever. I took a share. I figure the rest belong to you. They're worth about 40,000 Solar Credits apiece, probably less on the outworlds, but enough to set you up pretty, so take good care of them." She'd have no trouble getting them out—Earth restricted only the *importing* of gold.

Her eyes got sort of liquidy. "I don't know what to—"

"Not going to cry are you?" I didn't want a scene here.

She smiled faintly. "Nope. I'm trying to forget how to do that."

"It's easy. I forgot a long time ago."

She was silent for a time, looking around and biting her lip. Then she said:

"Well, thanks anyway for giving this to me."

"Fair's fair," I told her. "Anyway, I came out way ahead. I won't have to work for clones again."

"You never ease up, do you?" she said as her face rearranged itself into harder lines. "I was almost hoping you'd . . ."

"What?"

She shrugged uncomfortably. "I don't know . . . change your mind about me . . . about clones . . . a little."

I looked away. "You've got about as much chance of seeing that as I have of changing yours about Barkham."

"Bodine," she said mechanically. "And why don't you just leave it alone."

"Because he was a no-good crook and that's the truth."

"It can't be. I won't let it be."

"The truth stinks sometimes. *Lots* of times."

"Not this time. Whatever you or anybody else thinks of Kyle—or whoever he was—I know he loved me and wanted me and no one can take that away."

"We'll see."

"No. *You'll* see. But in any event—" She smiled stiffly and stuck out her right hand. "You did your job well and I thank you for it."

"Will you thank me when you find out that card's a fake?"

"Only one way to prove it to you, isn't there?"

Her eyes held mine. She was *so sure*. Maybe she had to be. Maybe she had to hold onto the belief that someone out of all the Realpeople in all the worlds would do right by her. Too bad she had such lousy judgment.

She picked up her bag and stepped into the upchute. As she rose toward the Emigration platform I stepped back so I could watch her be processed. She walked to the counter and presented

her greencard to the clerk, and presently her arm for a tissue sample.

There was a long wait while the processor checked the genetic make-up of the sampled cells against the data in the central bank. I repeatedly rubbed my palms dry on my jumper but they stayed slick with sweat.

And then with a smile that must have been blinding at close range, Jean was passing through, waving the greencard in my direction, and heading for the shuttle. I gave her an elaborate shrug and turned away.

#### 14.

I stood at the edge of the platform for the Brooklyn tube and watched the shuttle rise blueward, a black dot against the rising sun. Someone who went in for that sort of thing would probably think it was beautiful.

Thought about that greencard . . . I'd had a few tense moments there wondering whether it would work.

Don't ask me why I did it. Don't know. Haven't become an oozer or anything like that, either. Nothing's changed. Just happened that before I went to meet Jean I returned to my compartment for a fresh jumpsuit and I came across the one with Jean's bloodstains on it. The idea hit me. The challenge appealed to me. The challenge and nothing more. So after I gave the astonished Elmero twenty of the statuettes—his fifty per cent share of what I'd made—he was *more* than willing to arrange the fix as a favor for his dear good friend Sigmundo. Said the blood on the jumper would enable his contact in Central Data to locate Jean's genotype and change her status in no time. True to

his word, he handed me a new, *genuine* greencard in a tenth.

The shuttle disappeared from view, well on its way to the first stop to Out Where All The Good Folks Go. I pulled out the bogus card Barkham had given Jean and dropped it over the edge of the platform. It fluttered and see-sawed down into the dimness below. Soon it too was out of sight.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO:  
**OPENING MOVE  
ON EGIL'S WORLD**

by  
John Dalmas

What do you do when your brothers are oppressed? Modern American Liberals will tell you that, with the single exception of right-wing authoritarian regimes, any time a gang of murderous social deviants manages to seize power it instantly becomes a Sovereign State, and as such is immune to "interference."

No matter if the head of state kills his enemies and eats them (Idi Amin), or murders half his people (Pol Pot), or merely condemns his fellows to a life of endless want and *anomie* (any Communist regime), a sovereign state is sacred, and nothing justifies the intervention of a foreign power in its affairs.

Do you believe that?

—JPB



# OPENING MOVE ON EGIL'S WORLD

John Dalmás

The body felt bad, really bad, as if it had been run through a hay baler. Compressed, badly congested. Getting into it was unpleasant. Not surprising: the blood had stopped circulating. I took a small breath and told the heart to pump. It did, hesitantly, then picked up a steady if somewhat feeble beat.

"Didn't you call the morgue yet?" The voice was female and irritated.

"When I get a chance. What's the hurry? The doc only called him dead a minute ago."

"More like five. And it makes me nervous to have a stiff around." Her voice turned whiny. "Our relief ought to be here. It's after midnight."

It was reassuring to find I could understand the language. Theoretically I would, because the physical entity knew it, but I'd never done this before. I opened the eyes. It took a few seconds to focus.

They found a blurred expanse of white uniform dress with its back turned. I groaned and she jumped as if stuck with a needle.

"A-a-ah!" She spun around almost nimbly in spite of her bulk. "He's alive!"

She backed away, but the guy came over and looked down at me. They looked about as un-Earthly as a Navajo looks non-European.

"Well good for him," he said. "Takes a lot to kill some of these rum pots." He looked me over thoughtfully. "Dammed remarkable though. Even alive, I wouldn't think he could regain consciousness. Not with his blood alcohol level."

It seemed smartest not to speak. I closed my eyes again and just lay there, putting my attention on one part of the body after another, getting in communication. I could feel the blood moving through the internal organs, the limbs, making the body tingle and burn as if it was thawing out. I wondered if there had been any brain damage from the brief period without circulation.

Shortly someone began to wheel out the table I was on, but I paid little heed, just kept moving my attention around to different parts of the body—left foot, right foot, right calf, left. I felt them transfer me onto a bed. When they'd gone, I opened my eyes again and spotted different things around the ceiling—cracks, lights, a slowly turning ceiling fan that stirred the warm and muggy air. Maybe they hadn't invented air conditioning on Egil's World yet. At least they didn't have it in this ward.

The body was doing a lot better now; I could trust it to run on automatic for a while. So I went out of it, putting myself up in the center of the room, just below the ceiling, where I could look the place over. Better than sitting up to look through the eyes. I could see better from here, and besides, the head hurt.

"I promise you, chum," I thought to the body, "I'll never load you up like the last guy did."

It was obviously a charity ward; the occupants and the place felt drab. It didn't especially *look* drab, but I picked up a grundgy sense of apathy, pain, boredom, near-death . . . I looked around, spotting who each feeling came from, then put my attention back on my new body again.

Gulli Vinch, that was its name. You wouldn't exactly say the body had memories, but it had a complete recording of everything it had ever experienced, awake and asleep. After a bit I'd sort out the things that seemed important for me to know, but first I'd make it well again. If I was going to live with it, I wanted it to feel a lot better than it felt just now.

After a bit I sensed someone's attention on it. Not one of the other patients; someone alert and interested. A nurse was with him. They came over to my bed and I opened the eyes, turning the head slightly to look through them.

"Well, Mr. Vinch! You really are remarkable!"

They knew my name. Vinch must have been carrying identification.

"Thanks," I mumbled.

That brought an instant reaction: I had spoken! He frowned. "Twenty minutes ago you were officially dead," he said almost accusingly. "Your vital signs were undetectable; I checked them myself. And your blood alcohol level was high enough to burn for fuel. How the devil can you talk now? At best you should be comatose!"

He'd signed a death certificate and I'd made him wrong. I groaned and closed my eyes again, and he felt a little better. Until he took my pulse, which was doing nicely, thub-a-dub, thub-a-dub.

Beneath his resentment was another feeling. What

I made of it was that someone else was interested in me, someone he would report to. Someone with an ugly intention. Which as far as I was concerned was an unwanted complication. It would be helpful to know what it was.

He left; the nurse checked my pulse again, and my blood pressure. After that, no one bothered me for an hour. I spent much of the time reviewing the time line, the memory impressions, of the body. It's not difficult if you know how. You have to know the kinds of things you're looking for and how to access them.

Gulli Vinch had been unemployed, vagrant, and alcoholic—but only recently. Before that he'd been a dock worker—steady, reliable, had a wife and kid. Drank like a lot of guys, a few beers, occasionally got a little tight, but no booze problem. And then it had started, three weeks before.

Something was definitely weird, but I didn't know whether it was important to me or not. I decided it probably wasn't, because we'd had no previous relationship and because Vinch would have no political identity here.

Then two orderlies came in, transferred me to a gurney, and began to wheel me from the ward. Something felt definitely not okay about this, so I opened my eyes.

"What're you doing?" I asked thickly.

The one in charge smiled down at me. "Oh. You're awake, Mr. Vinch. The doctor wants you moved to a private room."

"Me? Why a private room for me? I'm broke."

He didn't know. The question hadn't occurred to him. He looked at it, saying nothing. The new room was in the psychiatric section, but these were sometimes used for nonpsychiatric charity patients. So I had to see the reason for myself: they didn't

want to kill me in a room where there were twenty other people.

That was irrational on two counts: One, there must be lots of ways to kill someone covertly in a hospital without anyone twigging on it. And corpses are not uncommon. And two, why would anyone want to kill Gulli Vinch?

Why indeed? While I was digging into this, they put me into another bed and left. I dived back down Gulli Vinch's time line; the answer was farther back than three weeks, and I didn't have long to find it.

It didn't take long. About ten months earlier there was something, something totally occluded, something the time line refused to display. It was too painful, with very heavy "command" power. I poked around at it; there was a period of a couple of days I couldn't readily get into. It almost had to be implanting—a pain-drug-hypnosis episode: that was much the likeliest explanation. Someone, for some reason, had drugged him, given him hypnotic commands, and enforced it with heavy electroshocks.

Just before the implant was an injury, an accident. A rope had slipped, a cargo net loaded with railroad ties had swung loose, and Gulli Vinch had been hit on the head. Unconscious, he'd been rushed to a hospital. Later he had left again, functional and superficially normal. In between, someone had tampered heavily with his mind.

And this was the hospital where he'd been implanted. It was time to leave. Someone here didn't want Gulli Vinch alive anymore. I opened my eyes, sat up, and swung my feet out of bed. Restraining straps dangled in loose laps from its frame. Fortunately. And fortunately the window wasn't barred.

On the face of it, they shouldn't feel any urgency. Obviously someone who'd been so thoroughly

loaded—even apparently dead—wasn't going to wander off right away. At the very least they'd expect him to have the grandfather of all hangovers, probably to be followed by delirium tremens.

But I'd also proven totally unpredictable, and that would worry them, whoever "them" was. So the man with the syringe, or whatever they were going to use, might show up any minute. He'd better not arrive alone. Gulli Vinch had loaded lots of bales and crates and other things heavy and resistant; he had muscles like a bull.

I looked in the closet, but there weren't any clothes there. And the hospital gown I wore was no more adequate for street wear than hospital gowns on Earth. So I'd just have to wait, slug the orderly, and hope his clothes were big enough for me.

I walked to the window. It was only about a ten-foot drop to the grass below. I tested it to see if it would open.

It opened, all right, and a damn alarm began to bleep, quietly but insistently in the hall. I exercised a couple of choice expletives, climbed over the sill, and dropped to the ground. There was only one way to run, because I was in a courtyard open in just one direction. The short white gown flapped around my thighs as I ran, the night air cool on my behind. Fortunately it was about two or three A.M.

I reached the sidewalk quickly and turned right. Wrong direction! A uniformed policeman and two men in white emerged from an entrance ahead and saw me at once. I spun and took off the other way, the concrete hard beneath my bare feet. The current 400-meter champion would've been hard pressed to keep up with me, and I quickly put a corner between me and my pursuers. Not bad, I

thought, for a body declared dead a few hours before; give them something to think about.

I sprinted a long half block farther without seeing anyone, ducked into an alley, slowed to a stumbling trot and then a walk. The body couldn't have kept that up long, even with someone like me driving it. The heart was pounding, the legs shaking, the lungs heaving. The throat rasped from the violence of its breathing. *You're okay*, I thought to it. I was beginning to have a fondness for it. *You really are okay*.

I put my attention out. My former pursuers had reached the corner and stopped temporarily, looking down the street. For all they knew, I could have ducked into an entryway or even an unlocked door, or I might possibly have reached the next corner and turned.

Or I might have gone into this alley.

I hurried ahead to a board fence, climbed carefully onto it—it wasn't very solid—and from it climbed onto a shed roof, flat, with a low parapet around it. I lay down on my back, paying no attention to the stars overhead, and began to look at possibilities. A plan was needed, before daylight. Maybe find some poor pedestrian, some solitary soul, mug him as gently as possible, and take his clothes. I hoped it wouldn't come to that, but I didn't see any alternative.

I sensed it the minute they looked down the alley. They stood there a moment, then entered slowly, pacing along still breathing hard, peering into and behind everything. The policeman had a gun in his hand. He was nervous, half expecting me to jump out at him, a decent guy not wanting to shoot anyone.

It never occurred to them they had me treed.

After they'd passed, I lay there awhile, waiting

for them to move out of the area. Meanwhile I looked again at the time line of Gulli Vinch. Whatever the command he'd been implanted with, his sense of ethics had been stronger. Impressive. Three weeks ago, something had triggered that command, some code word or some event. He was then supposed to *do* something, probably assassinate someone. No one would know why, including Vinch, and the newspapers would have a field day, speculating. His lawyer would no doubt enter an insanity plea, if they had those on Egil's World. They'd put him away in a prison or asylum or grave, and the affair would gradually be forgotten.

But instead of assassinating someone, Gulli Vinch, out of basic ethics and totally bewildered and unknowing about what was happening with him, had gone on a tremendous drunk instead, overriding the command the only way he was able to.

That much I could figure out, but I had no idea of the who or why. After a while I put my attention out again, to see if it was safe to come down. It wasn't. It very much wasn't! Two patrol cars were cruising the neighborhood, and at least two pairs of officers were exploring on foot. It looked as if I might have to spend the day up there, too.

And then I picked up something else and knew that wasn't going to work, either, because three men were being led from the hospital grounds by something very like a bloodhound.

That was fast response time! Politics was definitely involved. I wondered if they got onto criminals that fast.

I didn't really want to abandon the body known as Gulli Vinch. I liked it, or actually, I liked what it had shown me about the former occupant; he'd been a hell of a guy. What he'd held out against was really bad, really heavy. I hoped I'd meet him



somewhere, and hoped I'd recognize him. I'd recruit him sure as hell. Or her, whichever the case might then be.

Just now, though, it was best to blow, to abandon the trapped Gulli Vinch body. I moved out and looked down at it, slumped now, inert and vacant. Completely abandoned, it would die soon. Then I looked at the stars in their unfamiliar constellations, and drifted up, turning west toward the ocean.

However admirable, Gulli Vinch was hardly the kind of identity I'd come here to assume. I was supposed to establish a financial and power base for the operation. But it hadn't been any accident or mistake that I had picked the body of Gulli Vinch to move into. There was a why; I just didn't know yet what it was. But it was more than convenience or availability.

One thing we learn in training is that the more you get cleaned up, the more you're able to trust your intuitive decisions. We're not always right, of course: the physical universe is like that. So we like lots of information, but sometimes the information just isn't available. Then it comes down to what Obi Wan said: "Trust in the Force, Luke." Although in real life you have to create the Force as you go. We become masters of serendipity; never gamble with us.

So there was definitely a why for me having found myself in the identity of Gulli Vinch, even though I might not spot it before this game was over, if then.

Yes, game. A person needs a game to live above the lowest level of existence. Even if it's only the game of Make the Car Payments. To live very fully, he needs a big game. I'd played mostly small games for a long time, until a dozen years earlier. Then

I'd been recruited and cleaned up and trained, and trained some more and cleaned up some more, getting some field experience now and then along the way.

Then they'd offered me a big game, a new kind of game, the kind we'd all been looking forward to. An off-planet game. I'd jumped at it and come here to Egil's World, which definitely needed us. It was like a lot of worlds, but you've got to start somewhere. And it's easiest to start with one that's a lot like what you're used to—not just physically/biologically, but economically and socially.

I'd arrived in the only way that was technically feasible just yet—without a body—and picked one up that was newly abandoned.

Time goes a bit weird on me when I'm out of a body. Actually, weird isn't the word. But I experience time differently, and space. And importances; definitely importances. So instead of getting right down to business when I left Gulli, I sort of did a little tour. There was a beautiful ocean with a broad path of moonlight, and up close, dark swells and the phosphorescent tracks of the local equivalent of dolphins.

After that were fragrant mountains, forested and black against a sky that, even with the moonlight, displayed more stars than I was used to. And I'm from the reservation, which has some of the most beautiful night skies on Earth.

Then, abruptly, I was in a room, and there was morning sunlight slanting through what, back on Earth, we called French doors. On the floor was a male body in pajamas. A woman knelt beside it, raising an eyelid hesitantly with a finger. She peered closely.

"He's really dead! I'm sure of it!"

"Of course he's dead. You gave him enough of that stuff to kill two men."

She looked back over her shoulder at the man who'd spoken, slender like herself and still young. "I gave him?" she complained, "What about you?"

"All right, we both gave it to him. You just happened to put it in the bottle."

They were yakking away totally oblivious, of course, to the recent occupant of the corpse, who was hanging above his old body in helpless rage. He was so upset, he hadn't even noticed me, and of course they hadn't either. As far as they were concerned, they were alone in the room with one stiff.

And it would be *getting* stiff, or at least beyond reasonable salvaging, if I didn't do something soon. I didn't know what the previous occupant would think of me moving into his ex-body, but it was beyond anything *he* could do for it. It was me or the worms, so to speak.

I moved in.

And he suddenly became aware, and if he'd been mad before, he was three times as mad now. He tried to move in with me, and that was suddenly the most active corpse you'd ever want to see! It flopped and thrashed around something awful. The woman's eyes rolled back in her head and she slumped over unconscious. The guy went under the bed; I don't know what he expected to find there.

It was a brief struggle; the ex-tenant was no match for me. Then he just hung there, glowering.

"Look," I thought to him. "I can fix this up and you can't. You don't know how. So don't be a turkey. Go pick up a new baby body somewhere." I could feel him recognizing the logic of it, the inevitability, but he was still mad. "I'll make you

a promise," I added. "These two will get theirs. You can bet on it."

I felt his grudging acquiescence, and then he was gone.

I let the body lay very loosely. After a minute or so the guy crawled out from beneath the bed. He didn't stand up, just crawled over to the woman and slapped her face sharply three or four times. She groaned, sat up, looked around and saw the body. And remembered.

"He's alive!" she yelped.

Her friend laughed. "Hardly! That stuff paralyzes the heart. Those were just his death throes."

Interesting, the strange explanations people will come up with. When the simple truth was that two ghosts . . .

"Death throes?" She looked doubtful. I felt this temptation to sit up and moan or gibber or do something else gross, but I just lay there playing dead, watching them with my eyes closed, feeling the burning as the blood flowed again. She got up and backed toward the liquor cabinet, then felt for the handle.

"And don't start that," the guy said sharply.

"I need it," she retorted. "The police will expect it. The bereaved wife."

"No. We're going out for a morning drive." He went to the door and opened it. "In about an hour and a half, Mully will be coming over from the servants' wing; we'll let her find him. When we get home, we'll learn all about it. Then you can get as crooked as you want."

He closed the door behind them.

By the time Mully knocked, I had shaven and showered. But before doing that, I had looked over Jonard Faeris's time line. That's who I was now—

Jonard Faeris. It was a cursory review, but enough to start with. As a person, I preferred the being who'd been Gulli Vinch, but I also had a lot of respect and admiration for Faeris. He was extremely able, and basically fairly ethical. His principal shortcomings were a shortage of human warmth and a bad temper. And he held grudges, which of course manufactures enemies as fast as almost anything does.

Being Jonard Faeris meant I wouldn't have to start with a hamburger stand and work up. It made a lot more sense than being Gulli Vinch.

I also had a chance to consider a few questions. It seemed to me that an autopsy would readily have identified cardiac paralysis as the cause of Jonard's death; the medical profession here certainly seemed advanced enough for that. And the odds were that the poison could have been isolated and identified.

Yet Jonard's wife and brother-in-law had felt no concern—none at all—that they might be busted for murder. And they didn't seem stupid enough to overlook the possibility. But even a coroner on the take seemed unlikely to risk a phony report on someone like Faeris just because some inept jerk offered him a bunch of money; too dangerous. Fear might do it, but not money.

Again, it looked like politics. Politics on Egil's World seemed to be more corrupt than we'd realized.

I had Mully serve breakfast in the study. She didn't notice anything different about Faeris, but then, she wasn't very discerning anyway. I glanced at his—my—correspondence pending, and his desk files, but they meant little to me. I'd have to do some serious study for a few days. Read enough reports and it ought to start coming to me.

Then I looked backward in time to see where his safe was. I pushed the appropriate stud in a picture frame and watched the safe come up through the floor. Pretty classy! Not at all where you'd look for it.

My fingers knew the combination. I thumbed through an expandable folder of financial documents, memorized a pair of secret bank account numbers—and examined his will. Now *that* was interesting. It looked foolproof, and Alyn Faeris, his loving wife, was not a huge beneficiary. She was to receive a modest cash sum and a trust fund. The rest was to go to a foundation. So financially, Alyn was much better off financially with Jonard alive than dead, which meant she didn't know the terms of the will. Otherwise she'd never have killed him.

Hm-m. Made sense, but somehow I didn't trust it, and checked the body's time line for a meeting where the will was shown. After a brief wait it showed me. Jonard and Alyn and several other people had met in this room; I watched and heard the attorney read and explain the will.

She did know! But even so, she and Lingert, her half-brother, had decided to kill Jonard Faeris. Did a good job of it, too. And I hadn't sensed any real hatred in them. Dislike, yes, and the sort of hostility that people feel for someone they have guilty secrets from, like adultery and incest. But nothing that seemed to explain murder, especially murder that would cost them money and might endanger their freedom. It still smelled like KGB- or CIA-style politics.

After a while they'd get home and find me alive and well. When they finished freaking out, I'd poke around with questions and see what kind of thoughts and mental pictures they'd provide me

with. The information might be very important to my continuing health. If someone blew Jonard Faeris's head off or crushed him with a truck, that would be well beyond my ability to repair.

Most importantly, I needed a stable continuing identity in order to get much accomplished. I couldn't jump around from body to body like a flea at a dog show. And the Jonard Faeris identity had two very big advantages for us: wealth and influence.

While I waited, I tried to contact the other three members of the project, but drew a blank. They probably had their attention pretty thoroughly on their new scenes. I had no idea where they might be on this planet, or *who* they might be.

Kind of wild, especially when you consider it was a new kind of operation: Four ex-Earthlings without any resources except themselves, not even a body to start with, being sent to salvage an unfamiliar planet. All we had was training and some skimpy information, enough to indicate that the place was sliding toward the edge.

But our training had been very good. So while we may have jumped in with the lions, we knew a lot about taming lions. We were not sacrificial lambs.

After a bit I decided to stop waiting for the would-be murderers. I needed to visit Faeris's office and start learning about where my money came from, and how to ensure that it kept on coming. So I looked back briefly on how he got to work. It was simple; I buzzed the steward and had him get the chauffeur.

I should have known there'd be a Faeris Building. It stood on a low bluff above the Buffalo River; I recognized it as soon as I saw it. I was really getting grooved in on being Jonard Faeris now; it

was easy. If the body had data in a trained-in circuit, it was immediately available without looking for it, just as it had been to the original Jonard Faeris. I simply provided a point of view, analysis, and of course, intention.

On the other hand, if the data weren't part of an existing circuit, access might take some attention. In the lobby and corridors I nodded to some people that Faeris knew well and spoke to a couple by name. But when I told my office receptionist to call in my staff, her mental response was mild surprise: Faeris almost never convened all of them together.

Within ninety seconds there were six people in my office besides myself—five men and a woman. The body gave me names for them, and their positions. I looked them over, sorting briefly through their feelings and reactions until they began mentally to fidget. My political aid, Rik Walen, looked earnestly loyal, but he felt treacherous as an orc. Sometime soon I'd question him, read his mental responses, and when I knew what was going on with him, I'd fire him.

"I want all of you to be available to me if I call you today," I said. "You can all go now except Fahn and Korry."

There was some mental confusion and unexpressed resentment as they left. They weren't used to being summoned and dismissed with nothing more than that. This left me with my chief of staff, Korry Wern, and my executive secretary, Fahn Fillian. The way I read Korry, he was sober, very smart, and very responsible. Fahn was loyal and extraordinarily competent, her principal shortcoming being self-deprecation. She was also in love with Faeris and had slept with him, which suggested a touch of masochism.



I had two reasons for keeping them with me when I dismissed the others. They were the two who handled the day-to-day routine administration of the company, and they were both people I could talk frankly with, up to a point.

"Sit," I said. "I need to level with you."

They seated themselves on chairs while I sat on the corner of my desk where I could look down on them. The way Jonard himself would. After some seconds I spoke.

"Jonard Faeris died last night," I told them. "When he came back to life, he was a different person, a different personality. There's a new Jonard Faeris."

Naturally they looked at me without the least comprehension. That was okay. They had the fact now; they'd integrate it in whatever way was real to them.

"I'm letting you in on this for a very practical reason," I went on. "I have partial amnesia. There are a lot of things I can't remember yet. In fact, I know nothing about the business now, although it will start coming back to me. I don't even know what we do here, which obviously presents a problem in running this place.

"So you two are going to run it for me for a while. While I learn the ropes. You'll appear to be carrying out my decisions, but actually the decisions will be yours."

"But we, I, can't do that!" Fahn said. "I wouldn't know how! This is an enormous operation, with lots of executive decisions to make. With millions and millions of dollars involved."

"Okay. I understand that. But you're better prepared to make decisions now than I am. Look, I'll make it easy for you; I'll give you a standard operating policy. Korrry, as chief of staff you know

pretty much everything that I knew. Change nothing. The way Jonard Faeris did things before was obviously very successful, so that's the way you'll do them. Decide that 'This is the decision Jonard would have made, so it's the one I'll make for him.'

"And Fahn, you'll look at every decision before it's finalized, and make sure that Korry did it that way—that everything is done the way the old Jonard would do it. Any executive order that would have come from me, Korry will draft, but you will have to cosign before it goes out in final form."

I looked at Korry. "Any disagreement on that?"

There wasn't.

"And if you're not sure about something, in a real pinch either of you can talk to me about it. But if you do come and talk to me about it, I'll be unhappy, because you two can do it without me. All I want from you are briefings, broad briefings on general operations, until I get some feel for this."

I got up. They glanced at each other, then looked at me. They hadn't decided I was crazy, but they were mystified. Korry had actually accepted my evaluation; he knew they could pull it off. Fahn was in shock.

"Now I need to be alone, to sort a lot of things out. Fahn, tell Midra I am not to be disturbed, by anyone including her or you. Except to sign two orders. Korry, draft an order for my signature that says what I just told you, leaving out the amnesia of course. And then draft another order giving you each a forty percent raise in salary; goes with the increased responsibility. Start!"

The last word I said in a tone that brooked nothing short of compliance. They stood at once and left. Then I sat again and began to write on

long sheets of ruled paper I found neatly stacked on my desk. I started with the central goals of our project, its subordinate goals, and what we'd have to accomplish to meet them. That part was easy; most had been agreed upon before we left Earth. There were some key rules we would follow in operating so we wouldn't blow it. For example, don't depend on politicians. Even the honest ones commonly aren't able to keep a promise.

Next I jotted down some basic plans to start working on, exploratory plans because I knew so little about the scene here yet.

It wouldn't have done to have people read any of it, but there was no real danger of that. Even on Earth there wouldn't have been, because I wrote them in Navajo, my mother tongue.

When I'd finished, I called Fahn and told her to prepare a brief summary of all the company's operations. "Keep it under thirty pages," I said. Then I called my chauffeur and went home. To my surprise, Alyn and Lingert hadn't gotten back yet. I asked myself where they were and didn't come up with anything. Something felt definitely wrong about this. Moments later the doorbell rang, and I knew at once it was the police. I started for the front door, getting there as the butler was letting them in.

There were two of them, one an inspector and the other his aid, both wearing black civvies.

The inspector looked at me. "Mr. Faeris?" he asked uncertainly. I nodded and he extended his hand to me. "I am Inspector Garm, Isyul Garm, of Central Investigation."

"Glad to meet you, Inspector," I said, and shook the hand. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid," he said. He flickered the

slightest smile of satisfaction, nothing more than a twitch, quickly covering it with his best expression of official sympathy. I'd been had.

Isyul Garm was quite criminal. A genuine police inspector but quite criminal. He looked at me with concealed intensity, except of course he couldn't conceal it from me. But he'd already faked me out: he'd introduced himself as a stranger, when actually he and Faeris had met a couple of times before. And I'd reacted in kind before I'd picked it up. Why had he done that? Obviously he suspected.

"I have come to deliver some . . . How shall I say it?" He shook his head. "It is terribly regrettable. Your wife. She has had an accident. She and her brother."

"No!"

"They were motoring in the mountains, on the road to Elk Lake, and apparently their steering malfunctioned. It is difficult to be entirely sure. They went through the guard rail—and into the canyon. The car was utterly demolished."

I looked stunned for him. "Then they're dead."

He nodded.

"Can I see them?"

"If you insist. I wouldn't advise it. You see, there was a fire."

I exhaled audibly. "I understand. You're right, of course. Is there anything I need to do then? Something to sign?"

"No. Nothing is necessary."

"Thank you. Would you like to come in? A drink maybe?"

"No. I should be on my way."

"I see. Um, is there any reason to suspect . . . that the accident was not, uh, entirely accidental? I mean, you *are* an inspector of police."

"No. There is no reason at all to suspect foul

play. I came only because you are a prominent and highly respected citizen. It would not have been appropriate for you to hear of this from someone of lesser rank than myself." He shook his head sympathetically. "I'm very sorry that it is necessary for you to hear it at all." He took a step backward and put his black hat—rather like a flat-topped derby—on his bald-topped head.

"Yes," I said, "so am I. Thank you, Inspector, for your courtesy."

He nodded and they left. I closed the door. "Berl," I said to the butler in my best subdued tone, "tell Derrol I want him at once, out front with the car."

The cars here resembled something from a Hollywood set for a 1920s' movie—boxy, with pulldown curtains for the rear windows. The only conspicuous difference was that the doors had knobs on the outside. Interesting, the extent of resemblance here with Earth.

I got in front with the chauffeur, which, from his mental response, was out of character for Jonard Faeris. I was inadvertently overriding some of Jonard's old behavior circuits. I told Derrol where I wanted to go—the road to Elk Lake—and we left.

There was not a great deal of traffic as we drove down brick-paved city thoroughfares and then a narrow concrete road that here passed for a major highway. The city was at the lower end of a broad valley where the Buffalo River became Fornel Bay. Farther up, the valley was fertile farmland.

Farming, at least, was much different here than it had ever been in the USA—perhaps more like parts of Europe a century past. The farmsteads, instead of being family size, were extensive holdings, each with its mansion and a nearby aggregation of neat cottages, sheds, and barns, almost like

a tiny village. It was haying time, and large crews of farmhands with pitchforks were throwing cocks of loose hay onto wagons pulled by horses. Or what, at a glance, could almost pass for horses.

The chauffeur turned off onto a gravel road, and after a bit we were climbing into wooded foothills. Nice looking country, but I wasn't much interested in scenery.

My brief conversation with Isyul Garm bothered me. What had made him suspicious in the first place? Or who? Mully? I was sure I'd have picked up any suspicion on her part. Korry or Fahn? I was sure both were loyal, neither was loose-mouthed, and neither had understood what I'd told them about an old and a new Jonard Faeris.

There was another possibility, of course: that there were baddies here with mental powers we weren't aware of.

We drove about fifty miles total before we came to the place. It was easy to spot: I could feel it, and the guard rail hadn't been repaired yet. I got out and walked to the broken rail. Several hundred feet below were the remains of the car. It had burned, and so had a clump of trees.

Then I looked down the time line of the location. The car had come down the slope and not even attempted to make the turn, just went straight. I looked again, more closely. The two bodies in the front seat had been dead or unconscious before they'd ever reached the rail. The steering wheel had been held on a straight course by two pieces of rope.

I'm seldom fully certain of what I see on the time line of a *place*; it's possible to unwittingly create imaginary pictures and look at them instead of what really happened. But it fitted, and it felt

right. And at my level of training you're pretty damn good, to be honest about it.

I told Derrol to wait, and walked a hundred yards or so to a grove of handsome open-crowned "pines" overlooking the canyon. The ridge opposite was heavily timbered with what, from this distance, looked not unlike firs or spruce. I sat on the ground, my back against a fallen tree, and closed my eyes.

It had been quite a day, starting with midnight in the emergency room. I'd supposed that things here would go rather routinely—pick up a body and an identity, get a decent feel for the person's life, and start to work on a checklist of things to accomplish. The challenge would be to actually carry out those actions. Some would be tricky, and a few would be sticky.

But I'd run into one damn puzzle after another.

Lots of times you can ignore or bypass puzzles, unless they start to get in your way. Just go about your business. But these puzzles felt dangerous. To Jonard Faeris and maybe to the project.

So what did I actually know? Item: they were already into implanting here, and used it for assassination. Item: I had started out being Gulli Vinch, the sense of which was not obvious. Item: the murder of Jonard Faeris didn't make apparent sense either. It looked as if they'd been hired to do it and then effectively silenced. And Isyul Garm might have been connected to it.

And while I'd swear he didn't know what I really was, somehow—some mysterious how—he'd suspected I wasn't Jonard Faeris.

Actually I was, of course, in any physical or legal sense. Fingerprints, voiceprints, retina prints—if they had such things on this world—all could verify that I was Jonard Faeris.

I needed someone to sort these things out with; it was time to try for a project staff meeting again. I reached, lightly, and got a picture of a young girl in a bathrobe, reading at a table. She was maybe seventeen, and pretty. "Pat!" I thought to her. "Patty!"

I'd never seen her in that body before but I knew her well.

She turned a page, frowning slightly. "Merlin Yazzie! Where are you now? And *who* are you?"

I gave her the full rundown. She in turn was now Aegret Morn, who'd been pulled blue and unbreathing from a lake the evening before. Her parents were painfully grateful at her recovery; they'd be happy to accept the changes they'd be seeing in her. Aegret Morn had been a trial to Mama and Daddy.

They were prominent in their university town—her father was chairman of the cardiology department of the medical school—so the drowning and recovery had received considerable newspaper and radio attention locally. Too bad there wasn't TV on Egil's World, I thought; Aegret was a real cutey as well as smart with a capital S.

She had no advice or suggestions for me. Her own situation was simply one of getting established: of getting informed, of impressing people who'd known her before with the changes in her, and soon of getting more attention in the papers with her new activities. Becoming a pretty female piper promised to be a lot of fun.

She was the only other member of the project I was able to pick up. She was here in the same country, Hermaria, exactly as intended, and it was helpful just to have a line to her. I'd been enjoying it so much that I'd lost touch with my physical surroundings.



So it was quite unexpected when I heard footsteps on nearby gravel and picked up the threat that came with them. I didn't turn at once, just looked backwards, so to speak. There were two men, both dangerous. One was an intimidator type—big, mean, and not very bright. He'd be quicker than he looked, and even Gulli Vinch would have been outmatched in a fight with him.

The other was the really dangerous one. I was about to get a lot of new information the hard way. I turned as they strode toward me, more quiet now on pine needles. They stopped a few feet away.

"On your feet, Faeris."

"Why?"

"Otherwise I tell Baerki here to break your arm."

"Well," I said, getting up, "that's a pretty good reason. What are we going to do?"

He gestured at me with his head. Baerki grabbed me, jerked me around, and half-jogged me down to the road with my arm up behind my back, giving it a couple of painful jerks to make sure I was properly intimidated. I joined in the spirit of things and yelped a few times.

My car was gone; it had been grabbed and Derrol kidnapped. These guys had probably killed Alyn and Lingert to shut them up. Now, presumably, they'd take me to whoever was behind it all.

Baerki opened a door on their sedan and shoved me in roughly, then got in after me. Mr. Charm got in front and drove away. As we drove, Baerki handcuffed me, tied a black scarf over my face, and pushed me down onto the floor, where there was a lot more room than in cars back home. Blindfolded; that was hopeful. It suggested I might be released later. Why else would they care what I might see?

I could, of course, just locate my viewpoint outside and see anyway, and after a bit I would. But to begin with I put my attention on my hosts. Baerki wasn't very enlightening. His train of thought went from me to my other host, whom he didn't like and whose name was Kurf. And then to another man he worked with, whose wife he coveted. He began imagining a scene with her that would have done for a poor X movie.

Kurf's attention was on the road and the time. He was supposed to deliver me to someone named Grof. We were going to be late, which would be a mark against him. Meanwhile, as far as I could tell, he knew nothing about what would happen to me and didn't care. All he knew was that I was to be delivered.

Our destination turned out to be a palatial suburban home that compared with Jonard Faeris's. Its shaded driveway led to a small, brightly white barn held over from the horse and buggy days not many years before. Baerki cuffed me as the car stopped, hauled me out by the collar, and marched me to the house. We entered through a service entrance. From there I was shoved and jerked through a hall, a large dining room, and another hall, receiving gratuitous cuffs on the head along the route, until we came to a parlor.

And there was Rik Walen. The sonofabitch was a telepath! He'd spotted my talent before I'd noticed his, and covered. An actual natural telepath! Rare, even here apparently. They didn't just fall off the turnip truck.

He hadn't been waiting alone. With him was a man in a dirty white smock whom I read as a real degenerate—the worst in the room. Compared to him, Baerki was gentle, Kurf was kind, and Rik was loyal. The third man waiting was obviously

the top dog. He was analytical, ruthless, and totally in charge. The Jonard Faeris body gave me a label for him—Grof Hokens, a political boss.

Without comment, Kurf pulled the scarf off my face.

"Please have a chair, Mr. Faeris," said Hokens. Baerki shoved me backwards abruptly and forcefully into a chair. "I use the name Faeris advisedly," Hokens went on. "Mr. Walen assures me you are not Jonard."

"Mr. Walen," I answered, "is nuts. Take my advice, Hokens, and dump that creep. There's something weird about him; I should have fired his ass long ago."

Hokens turned to Walen. "He certainly looks and sounds like Jonard. Antagonistic enough."

Walen's smile was humorless. "Tell me, Mr. Faeris," Walen said, "when is your next major product release, and what is it?"

He knew, but his attention was on me, not on the answer, so I couldn't get it from him. "An ass-kicking machine," I said. "I'm going to use you in the demonstration."

Hokens chuckled. "Sounds like Jonard all right."

"Do you know, or don't you?" Walen asked. Then he changed the question. "Why did you fire Krimblis and promote Cholmer in his place?"

I sensed a trick in the question, but I didn't see what it was.

"Because he was a treacherous jerk like you."

He smirked at Hokens, who regarded me thoughtfully.

"You don't even know who they are," said Walen. "You didn't do your homework, Mr. Whoever You Are. Krimblis is the maitre d' at the Sportsmen's Club, and Cholmer used to be the chairman of the Party's finance committee."

"So?"

"Then why didn't you say so?"

"Why should I? I don't have to play games with some two-bit flunky like you."

He turned victoriously to Hokens. "See? He really doesn't know!" He gave me a genuine grin then. You don't see that many really genuine grins on someone like Walen. "For your information, Mr. X," he said, "Cholmer and Krimblis are Mr. Hokens's cook and gardener!"

He was half expecting me to shrink at that, but I disappointed him. I scowled. "Hokens," I said, "get this buffoon away from me and get a fingerprint man."

"No," he said, "I don't think I'll do that. It would be a waste of time, actually. It doesn't really make that much difference who you are; the important thing is who you look like. If you are Jonard Faeris, why, we'd already planned to sacrifice you to a good cause. If, ah, you were available. If you aren't really Jonard, it *could* compromise things if the real Jonard turns up, but we can handle that if it happens. Actually, I suspect that poor dear Jonard lies buried somewhere.

"I *would* like to know, of course. I don't like loose ends—unanswered questions. But it's not important." He turned to the man in the dirty white smock. "Ginder," he said, "if you please."

I didn't make another Jonard Faeris retort. Ginder drew a hypodermic syringe from his dirty smock and removed the needle guard while Baerki grabbed me by the hair and held me back in the chair. Ginder's sanitary technique wasn't the greatest; he jammed the needle through jacket and shirt sleeves into my upper arm and pressed the plunger. The Jonard Faeris body passed out in about five seconds.

I watched what happened next from a position overhead. At Hokens's order, Baerki hoisted me over his shoulder and followed Ginder to a cellar, with Hokens, Walen, and Kurf right behind. They had quite an installation there. I realized what it was before they got the body strapped down on the table.

Then we all left it there and went back upstairs.

I was a little surprised at Walen. As a telepath he missed a lot. At least subconsciously he should have sensed that I was with them. Certainly I'd have known, if our situations had been reversed. But apparently the idea that anyone could move around without a body was so foreign to him that he was deaf to me.

I hung around and listened to them as they relaxed with drinks and talked things over. And I began to get the picture of what was going on. Not all of it; some I learned or figured out later. What it came to was this:

Grof Hokens was the power behind the power in the National Party. The Nationals had been in power for fourteen years, but were inhibited most of the time by having only a plurality, not a majority, in parliament.

Now they had a good working majority, but they were still inhibited by the constitution and by what people would hold still for. What Hokens wanted was a dictatorship. He and a small but powerful group around him. And apparently they could depend on support from the army general staff if they could succeed in suspending the constitution without arousing a wide public revolt.

Hokens and his people had been setting the stage for it for more than a dozen years, in the guise of social reform. Social reform had been needed—it usually is—and they'd passed act after act against

some of the more conspicuous shortcomings of the society and the economy. Did it in a way that eroded or penalized the traditional sense of self-responsibility and social unity.

The parties out of power kicked and screamed, of course—they could be relied on for that at least—but they'd been responsible in large part for some of the preexisting problems, so they didn't have the credibility they needed.

It was a familiar sort of thing to me. My college major, in faraway Arizona, had been business administration, but I'd minored in history and found politics very interesting.

Their immediate goal was to declare martial law. To do this, they planned a major civil disorder that would inspire broad public fear and anger. And the opportunity was at hand. I was part of it.

They were on the eve of a traditional holiday, like the Fourth of July once had been in the States. It was also a bit like the annual All-Indian Pow-wow in Flagstaff, Arizona, when I was a kid. But nationwide. Thousands of people—farmworkers here instead of Indians—would crowd into every city and major town, sleeping in parks and vacant lots and even in people's yards. There'd be a lot of drinking, a certain amount of rowdiness, and even some hooliganism, which had gotten worse in recent years. There were carnivals, and street bands, and sidewalk booths that sold food and drinks and handicrafts.

And there were speeches in the square that every town had in front of the town hall or state capital or whatever.

That's where I fitted into their plans. I was the key. I was to set off a riot in Freedom Square, outside the national executive building. The rea-

son I'd been kidnapped had nothing to do with the failed assassination attempt. It was to program me—implant me—to say the right things at Freedom Square. And that was the function of Ginder in his grubby smock.

Jonard Faeris was a prominent party member, but not a real insider. He was too much a maverick to be part of the power elite. He was also a big industrialist. His major products were ships and railroad rolling stock, but lately he'd begun to manufacture and sell large mechanized farm machinery to the landed gentry—the wealthy families who'd received large land grants a few centuries earlier. This new machinery had begun to put farm workers out of work and threatened the jobs of millions more. That would be painful under any circumstances, but just now the economy as a whole was slumping into one of its periodic depressions. Unemployed field hands found few jobs in the cities.

So the idea was to have Jonard Faeris address thousands of farm workers in Freedom Square. He would laud the virtues of his new machines and get into a verbal firefight with hecklers. Agitators would then lead a riot in which Jonard hopefully would be killed. Federal mounted police—too few of them—would try to put down the riot. There was to be a pitched battle, the police would be overwhelmed, fires would be set, troops called in, and martial law declared.

Martial law would phase into a dictatorship. The whole affair was nicely programmed.

Hokens and company had not set up the friendly family assassination of Jonard Faeris. They weren't sure who had, but suspected a faction within their own party who'd gotten wind of the plot, didn't dare blow the whistle on them, and chose that way of trying to stop them.

After a while they all went back to the implanting room. I was there ahead of them, of course—I didn't need to take the stairs—and had the body awake for their arrival.

Here Ginder was the star. He taped on the electrodes. He injected the hypno-drug which was to render me extremely suggestible. He delivered the hypnotic commands, per Grof's instructions. And he applied the electroshocks. The functions of the shocks were: one, to ensure that I wouldn't *dare* to disobey; two, to imprint everything they wanted me to do as a mental circuit so I couldn't alter or forget instructions; and three, to make absolutely sure I wouldn't consciously remember any of this when I woke up.

They were wasting their time, of course. I vacated the body before the shock treatments, and to me, drugs and hypnotism are nothing. I didn't even have to fool Walen; he left before the proceedings began. He said it was too distressing for a telepath to be around that kind of agony.

Before the big day arrived, I spent some time getting information from Aegret. She became my library researcher. But now the time for preparing was over. The Square was full but not packed, and vendors were able to move around through the crowd. There were probably thirty thousand people there—maybe half of them farmhands. Another thirty or forty percent were blue collar workers, some of them out of jobs and a lot more who were worried about it happening to them.

They weren't hostile yet—they were out for a holiday—but they could get that way. Two politicians had addressed them already, setting them up, putting their attention on unemployment and on the speaker's platform.



Then it was my turn. Hokens and Walen stood by my sides and a step to the rear. Baerki and Kurf stood behind me a few feet. They were all a bit tense, waiting for the violence.

I raised my arms to still the crowd, then took the microphone in my hand and began just the way I was supposed to, by making sure everyone there knew it was Jonard Faeris speaking. The Jonard Faeris who was taking jobs away from people and replacing them with machines.

I could feel the hostility begin to form and build. And I began to deviate from the script.

"I know you guys are worried about jobs and security and your pride as men," I said. That was enough to change the feel of the crowd. Hostility was in abeyance; what I picked up now was suspicious interest. I went on.

"I spent some time last week with a friend of mine, a longshoreman named Gulli Vinch. A hell of a man, with a lot of muscle and a lot of character. The kind of man anyone can respect—anyone except maybe some politicians.

"Anyway, I spent some time with Gulli Vinch, and I've gotten a different viewpoint on a few things. Large efficient machines, like gas-driven field harvesters, gang plows, goby pickers, and things like that have their good points. But a man deserves the right to make a living. And a man's way of life, if it's honest and if he has pride in himself and his work—a man's way of life needs to be respected. A man needs *respect*!" I paused. "Even an honest politician should be respected, when you find one."

There was a ripple of laughter from the crowd, and a beginning of excitement. From Hokens came a sense of alarm, but the microphone cord led out

in front of me and I'd already queered his plan. So no one tried to cut me off.

"Now I'm pretty proud of my locomotives and ships," I went on. "Like Hermarian farmhands, they are strong, built solid. They're as good as the best, anywhere in the world. They *are* the best.

"I'm also proud of my new farm machines, but I'll tell you what I've decided to do with them. I'm going to take them off the market in this country—export them to Keron, where they want that kind of thing. And I'm going to throw my weight behind the Agrarian Party, to see if we can't get somewhere with a land reform bill!"

I felt their attention surge toward me, as if they were physically leaning forward to listen.

"Grof Hokens here didn't know about that," I went on. "If he'd had any idea what I was going to say up here, he'd never have agreed to let me speak to you. Because we all know where *he* stands on land reform. Right? Squarely against it!"

A wave of laughter came from the crowd, with scattered shouts of approval and encouragement.

"I wanted you to know these things. And I want you to know I'll make full use of the 'Original Rights' law to keep anyone else from copying my inventions for the period of protection. We're going to keep them off the market as long as possible or until such time as you want them, if you ever do.

"I want you to know these things so you can relax and enjoy your holiday. Thank you. Don't get *too* drunk, and may the rain hold off until the hay's all in."

They started to yell then, and not for my blood. These were wild cheers! The safest place for me just now was down among them.

But I'd barely taken the first step in their direction when Baerki's banana fingers hooked the back

of my belt, and there was Hokens on my right and Walen on my left. Behind me, Kurf stood beside Baerki with an open switchblade in his hand. Like Mac the Knife, he could slip that expert blade between two vertebrae with very little blood and less fuss, and they could hustle me off with their arms around me. The crowd out front might be my friends now, but they were too busy yelling themselves hoarse to notice much.

"Shall we go?" I asked Hokens.

"Back away," he said. "Don't turn. Back away, waving to the crowd, and don't turn until we're inside."

"Right." I moved backward from the railing in response to Baerki's steady pull, a grin on my face and my clasped hands waving overhead, and backed through the door into a drawing room.

Wu shu is the "gentle" kung fu, the aesthetic martial art, and I was not very advanced in it. In my old Merlin Yazzie body I'd been able to perform some pretty difficult forms, but I hadn't become a skilled fighter. And this Jonard Faeris body was neither very fit nor very flexible.

Nonetheless, necessity is necessity, and there was, of course, the element of surprise. I kicked backward and Kurf went down with a hyperextended knee and a shout of pain. Hokens took a chop to the Adam's apple and collapsed like a brick chimney in an earthquake. Walen was spared; he was closing the door. I wheeled with a spin kick to the side of Baerki's knee, but the kick didn't have the pop it should have had, and Baerki's legs were strong as oak trees.

Fortunately he was no sprinter, and his left knee had buckled momentarily. Jonard Faeris had probably not been a sprinter either, certainly not for the past thirty years, but I had a lot of incentive.

Kurf snapped off a shot as I reached the hall door, and I heard Baerki bellow with pain; he'd gotten in the way.

Still he was pounding after me as I ran. Either it wasn't much of a wound or he was so mad it didn't matter. The hall opened at the end into a large reception room. A long sofa stood between me and a staircase that rose on the opposite side of the room, and I cleared it like a deer. I heard it tip over, accompanied by an angry oath, as Baerki stumbled over it, and I sped up the stairs. Just as I disappeared from his sight, his pistol boomed. He'd almost forgotten it in his desire to get his big hands on me.

I was in a hall with several closed doors; I took the third. It opened into a small conference room with a dumbwaiter in one wall. I ran to the dumbwaiter, crawled in, closed its door behind me, and let myself rapidly down the rope, hand over hand, using my feet as brakes.

Jonard Faeris's untrained muscles were going to be sore in the morning, if I could get us out alive.

It looked pretty promising.

I climbed out at the next level and found myself in an executive office with two doors—one out and the other into a bathroom with its window on an air shaft. I took the hall door just in time to collide with Rik Walen hurrying by. Forgetting wu shu for the moment, I decked him with a right hook flush in the face. I felt the give of gristle, heard his cry of pain, saw a security guard enter the hall from one direction and took off in the other, turning a nearby corner into a cross hall before he could decide to shoot.

I was starting to enjoy myself.

I plunged on. The hall connected with another and I turned right, the direction that should get

me out the quickest. It did. A fire door at the end had EXIT on it in blue letters, and I rushed out into an alley.

Where Kurf was standing with a gun in his hand! I'd gotten so thoroughly into the game of fox and hounds that I'd forgotten to look on the other side of the door before opening it.

"Hi, Kurf," I said. What else could I say? He didn't answer in words, just snarled—snarled and raised his gun. I suppose his knee hurt as well as his pride. It looked as if I'd have to start over again as someone else, which would be a nuisance as well as a waste of progress and an outstanding identity.

But he didn't pull the trigger; we were only fifty feet down a service drive from the edge of the square, where a lot of people could be seen listening to a speaker. Instead he gestured at the door with his gun. I tried to open it, but it had locked automatically when I closed it, so I shrugged and looked back at Kurf.

And saw someone padding quietly down the drive behind him. Three cheers for serendipity! It was Gulli Vinch.

"It's locked," I said.

Kurf's lower jaw had an ugly jut to it as he gestured with the gun again, up the drive in the direction away from the square.

"That way?" I asked, stalling.

He pointed the gun at my head.

"Right," I said. "I got that. You want me to go that way. Are you all right? Can you walk okay? With that knee?"

And with that I hit the brick pavement, because Gulli's big arm was swinging, the fist on the end of it aimed at the back of Kurf's neck.

Gulli and I sat in a little booth in a corner of a nearby blue-collar tavern, about a third of the way into our beers. We'd completed the preliminaries; he'd told me who he was, in case I didn't know, and I'd said who I was.

He said he knew—he'd been in the crowd and been flabbergasted when I'd mentioned him in my speech. He wanted to know where and when I'd talked with him before, because he couldn't remember anything like that happening.

There were a lot of things he wasn't remembering. He thought I might be the key to filling in some gaps.

"First," I said, "why did you come down that drive?"

He shrugged. "I just happened to look that way and saw you come out the door. And then I saw him point his gun at you."

"Didn't you think it might be dangerous, coming down there like that?"

He shrugged again. He really didn't know why he'd done it.

"Well," I told him, "I did know who you were before you told me. I know things about you that you don't. All of them good. But I hadn't expected to see you here. The last time I saw Gulli Vinch, I assumed he was dying."

His eyes locked on mine; he wanted to know more. But so did I.

"How did you do it?" I asked. It wasn't a very explicit question; the reply would depend on what "it" he was able to look at. But I put a lot of intention into it, and what resulted was that he began to see some of the mental pictures he'd been hiding from himself. And of course I saw them too. They showed the body of Gulli Vinch lying unconscious on the shed roof, growing closer as if the

viewpoint was approaching it from above. Twenty feet, ten feet, five, and then the viewpoint became the eyes of Gulli Vinch as he'd sat up and looked around in the dark. At that point his memories became conscious. He'd gazed down at his hairy shanks below the hospital gown, and there was a sense of bewilderment. He'd gotten up then and walked to the edge of the roof, with no idea that the police were looking for him.

And saw some laundry on a clothesline in a nearby yard. I'd missed that. He jumped down, appropriated a set of bib overalls, and walked off between two houses to a street, where he encountered a loaded garbage wagon and hitched a ride. Simple as that.

Even the part he'd remembered before still seemed strange and dreamlike to him. He shook the pictures off and looked at me, recalling the question I'd asked.

"How did I do what?" he asked.

"How did you survive that drunk you were on? I thought sure you'd kill yourself."

He shook his head thoughtfully. "I guess I'll never know."

*You will when you're ready, I thought. No hurry. When you can know and laugh about it.*

About that time three other stevedores came in and saw us. They'd been in the crowd and heard my speech too, and knew Gulli. I had a couple more beers while we all talked. Gulli didn't drink much; nursed the beer he already had, saying he didn't care much for drinking anymore.

I told them quite a bit of my story, beginning with the kidnapping. Naturally I didn't tell them I hadn't been Jonard Faeris all along. I also left out the shock treatments, but included the drugs and

hypnosis and the plan to incite a riot, shoot up the crowd, and declare martial law.

After that they were ready to go out and incite their own riot, but I told them I had a plan. One that wouldn't play into Hokens's hands and end up with martial law. I didn't tell them what my plan was or how long it would take, just that I needed some good men, and they went along willingly enough.

Then I rented a cab, and all five of us went to Gulli's flat. His wife looked a little worried when we tramped in; she hadn't gotten unspooked yet from Gulli's three-week disappearance. But I included her in as we talked, which made her feel less threatened.

Before long I'd hired all four men as bodyguards. They weren't especially qualified, beyond being brawny and willing, but they looked formidable and they'd learn fast enough. I told them I was a hard man to work for, and they laughed. Then I told them what I'd pay them, which was twice what they'd been making, and they stopped laughing.

After that I hired two cabs and we all went to my place—the men and Gulli's wife and kid.

There was a lot to do on Egil's World; an enormous lot. But we had a start.



# THE LEADING EDGE

Roland J. Green

Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*. New York: TOR Books, 1985. \$13.95 hardcover.

Timothy Zahn, *A Coming of Age*. New York: Bluejay Books, 1985. \$14.95 hardcover.

These two leading novels might be facetiously summarized as being about "mean little kids," except that most of the children in the Zahn novel aren't really mean, and "mean" is a pathetically inadequate description of Card's main character.

*Ender's Game* is an expansion of Card's first published story (a novella which helped win him the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer in 1977). In the 21st century, Earth is facing the attack of an insect-like alien race, the "buggers." To meet that attack, Earth needs a genius of a war leader, so they take a child and systematically condition and train him.

The choice falls on Ender Wiggin, six years old,

undersized, persecuted by his sadistic older brother Peter, and generally a pariah because he is a third child in a population-controlled world. The book takes him and the other children selected for training as his eventual subordinate commanders into adolescence and their final confrontation with the buggers.

A major subplot traces the political schemes of Ender's brother Peter and his sister Valentine. By tapping into the computerized global communications network, they are able to achieve enormous power as political journalists without revealing their age.

The book has its flaws. Card seems undecided whether military leadership is a science or an art—although he's in good company there. The military strategy, tactics, weapons, and organization are part of the background, although the little that we see up front is reasonably credible.

But the core of the book is Ender's training and his growth into the most perfect combination of ruthlessness and compassion possible. That core is so well-done that it could carry a much heavier load of faults and still produce a fine book. Ender sometimes fails to be a convincing small boy, and the ending is jarringly anticlimatic, not to say rushed. Orson Scott Card started off his career with a bang, at one point seemed likely to end it with a whimper, but has now returned to show much of his original promise.

In Timothy Zahn's *A Coming of Age*, the children are closer to adolescence, which for them is a crisis. On the planet Tigris, a plague-induced mutation has caused children to develop telekinetic powers (teekay) which they lose at puberty. Before the first generation of telekinetics lost their powers, they had nearly destroyed civilization on Tigris.

Now it has been restored, but at the price of rigorous controls on children and preadolescents. They are kept segregated and illiterate, although they are also exploited as a valuable labor force.

Zahn interweaves with great skill three different subplots. Lisa, a girl on the verge of puberty, has illegally learned to read. A scientist is experimenting on his own son to find a way of prolonging teekay into adulthood. Finally, police detective Tirrell and his "Righthand" (telekinetic child partner) Tonio discover that both Lisa and the scientist are being dragged into the conspiracy of a "fagin," a man who runs a criminal network of children disguised as a religious cult.

Zahn's characterization and narrative technique are both thoroughly competent. He has also chosen to minimize the differences between our contemporary society and that of Tigris, to the point where even as one easily empathizes with the characters, one also wonders whether telekinesis wouldn't mean more changes. I don't want to throw too many stones at this approach, however—Andre Norton has been using it with great effect for more than thirty years—and Zahn, a Hugo winner, can certainly be presumed to know what he's doing, particularly when he has produced a thoroughly absorbing book.

William Gibson, *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Books, 1984. \$2.95 paperback.

This Ace Special is classic science fiction, a story that could not happen without the science. Here the science is computer technology. The book also recalls Philip K. Dick at his best, which makes it appropriate that it won the 1984 Philip K. Dick Memorial Award for best original paperback; it

then went on to win the 1984 Best Novel Nebula Award of the Science Fiction Writers of America. It is a first novel, but such a good one that Gibson really won't have to write anything better in order to become a considerable figure in sf.

In the 21st century, the world has survived a limited if nasty Third World War, gone into space, and become pervaded by enormous and sophisticated computers. One of the elite among the professional criminals is the "interface cowboy," a person who links his nervous system with a computer in order to steal data from it.

Case, who for want of a better term can be called the hero of the book, was one of the best cowboys. After he double-crossed his employers his nervous system was surgically mutilated. He was reduced to a desperate and doomed struggle for survival as a street criminal in the Tokyo slums.

Offered a chance to have both his nervous system and his profession restored, he took it, only to discover that his new employer was ultimately an artificial intelligence. This sapient computer was seeking to free itself from the restrictions placed on A.I.'s and dominate Earth's entire computer matrix.

No plot summary can really give away enough to spoil a reader's enjoyment of *Neuromancer*, at least for a reader with a basic knowledge of computers. Gibson's world is incredibly rich. He has thought about what frozen sleep could do for inherited family wealth and what microchip implants could do to prostitution. He can handle dialect, a common stumbling block, and he has even brought impressively to life that near-cliché of contemporary sf, the female martial-arts adept.

What distinguishes the book even more is Gibson's ability to draw the reader into the moral universe of his future world. It is not a very attrac-

tive world in many ways, but he neither wallows in its unattractiveness to demonstrate pseudosophistication nor intrudes pontifically to demonstrate his moral superiority over his own characters. We enter the world until we see it through the eyes of the people whose world it is, and our judgments become theirs. This emphatically does not make for escape reading; it may even make the book too grim for some readers. It certainly makes the book unforgettable like Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*, and marks Gibson as a talent to watch.

John Brunner, *The Tides of Time*. New York: Del Rey/Ballantine, 1984. \$2.95 paperback.

Dean Ing, *Single Combat*. New York; TOR Books, 1983. \$2.95 paperback.

In the days when sf was just discovering sex and feminism, a popular proclamation by those who claimed the credit for the discovery was that traditional sf was written for twelve-year old boys who went "Yuck!" when the cowboy kissed the girl instead of his horse. Such a judgment was never really justified except by a selective reading of sf through politically-tinted spectacles.

It's even less justified today, and the salvation-through-sex-and-strong-women types can claim no more than the hyena's share of the credit. More is due to the fact that those twelve-year-old boys, if they ever existed, are now grown men; if not husbands and fathers then at least with some practical experience of relationships. So it isn't surprising that we have two sf novels where the heart of the narrative is a love story.

In Brunner's *The Tides of Time*, an experiment in faster-than-light travel in a postholocaust society sends the lovers Gene and Anastasia on a trip

through time. As Anastasia's pregnancy advances, they travel farther and farther back into history as successive (or regressive?) incarnations of themselves, until at the end of the book they are snatched back to their own era, with disastrous consequences.

It might be stretching a point to call this novel "traditional," and it does have the common problem of Brunner's shorter works, being too compressed to leave the reader entirely sure what's going on. But Gene and Anastasia (and Brunner's comprehensive historical knowledge) remain unforgettable, as the lovers travel their doomed way to the book's emotionally-wrenching conclusion.

Ing's *Single Combat* is a considerably stronger book than the Brunner; in fact I would say it's Ing's best book to date. Again we have a postholocaust world, with the United States piecing itself back together mostly under the rule or at least the influence of a Mormon theocracy. Ted Quantrill and Marbrye Sanger are "rovers," nominally expert members of the Search and Rescue Service but actually trained assassins for the theocracy. After Quantrill lets one of his intended victims escape, Marbrye is sent to kill him. They both defect, and Marbrye cuts out the radio-commanded bomb implanted in Quantrill's head before it can be detonated. She isn't as lucky when a rebel surgeon tries to remove her bomb.

The book is a first-class combination of social-science and survivalist sf, with a great many ingenious high-tech weapons and devices and a galaxy (or at least a small globular cluster) of well-done characters. One thinks of Eve Simpson, the overweight and oversexed media star, and Sandy, the orphan teenager who lives with an adopted five-year-old "sister" in the southwestern desert under the protection of a half-ton wild boar named Ba'al.

Ing is also spectacularly successful at simply keeping the reader turning pages. But if Quantrill and Sanger had been no closer than James Bond and one of his interchangeable ladies, the book would have had a different, less memorable, and I think noticeably less agreeable flavor.

Joel Rosenberg, *Ties of Blood and Silver*. New York: Signet/New American Library, 1984. \$2.75 paperback.

Roger MacBride Allen, *The Torch of Honor*. New York: Baen Books, 1985. \$2.95 paperback.

Brian Daley, *Requiem for a Ruler of Worlds*. New York: Del Rey/Ballantine Books, 1985. \$3.50 paperback.

Rosenberg tells a classically simple coming-of-age story. David, a young thief in the underworld of the decadent city of Elweré on the planet Orog, steals something a little too valuable and makes powerful enemies. In his flight he is befriended by Eschteef, a silversmith belonging to the alien race of the schriff (and no cracks about short schriffts, please; Eschteef is eight feet tall and quite capable of tearing a punster or any other human apart with his bare hands). Eventually David must choose between the clan of his alien benefactor and his newly rediscovered aristocratic father.

Rosenberg has a fine eye for realistic characterization, brisk pacing, and the well-chosen detail, so that he has created a well-developed world and a respectable cast with real emotional impact in a 176-page book. Eschteef in particular is a solid addition to any gallery of memorable aliens.

The book neither precludes nor requires any sequels. David has come of age; and has made his choice of which ties to honor. On the other hand,

his further growth once he's left Oroga behind could be worth half a dozen volumes, all excellent reading if they were up to the standards of this one.

In *The Torch of Honor*, a husband-and-wife starship crew for the 22nd century's League of Planets Survey Service start off in search of a missing shipload of their Academy classmates. Instead they find the planet New Finland, recently conquered by the storm troopers of the Guardians, a thoroughly unpleasant fascist dictatorship from a planet settled by right-wing refugees from Earth. They contact the resistance, and set in motion a fast and furious chain of events which 300-odd pages later leads to the defeat of the Guardians and the liberation of New Finland.

This is one of the best military sf novels in some time, although a certain awkwardness of style and an occasional overloading with detail suggests a first novel. It is also as filled with gripping action as *Star Wars*, particularly in the climactic battle against the Guardians' answer to the Death Star, an asteroid-sized combination of starship, aircraft carrier, and dirigible appropriately named *Leviathan*. The difference is that the weaponry and vehicles of the battles are worked out according to the latest engineering data; much of it could probably be built before the end of the century.

*Torch* also virtually demands a sequel, and Allen is said to be working on one. So we can all hope to cheer as the League fleet descends on the Guardians' home planet and abates them like the public nuisance they are.

The echo of *Star Wars* is even stronger in Brian Daley's *Requiem for a Ruler of Worlds*. It begins with the death of interstellar potentate Caspar Wehr. One of his heirs is Hobart Floyt, a minor



bureaucrat on an Earth that has so thoroughly isolated itself from interstellar civilization that Terrans don't know how to conduct themselves off-planet.

To make sure Floyt can take up his inheritance, the Terran government blackmails interstellar drifter Alacrity Fitzhugh (clearly an illegitimate son of Han Solo by Barbarella) into escorting Floyt. The ensuing action is so fast and so much fun to follow that one rapidly loses any desire to quibble about undeveloped or illogical bits of background, and there is plenty of wit and plenty of interesting characters, as well as the possibility of further books to come.

Bill Gunston, *An Illustrated Guide to Future Fighters and Combat Aircraft*. New York: Arco Publishing Company, 1984. \$9.95 hardcover.

Leik Myrabo and Dean Ing, *The Future of Flight*. New York: Baen Books, 1985. \$7.95 trade paperback.

Kazuaki Iwasaki and Isaac Asimov, *Visions of the Universe*. Montrose: Carl Sagan Productions, 1981. \$29.95 hardcover.

Phil Hardy (Editor), *The Film Encyclopedia: Science Fiction*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984. \$24.95 hardcover.

These books are on topics of interest to sf readers and writers, both would-be and practicing. Since the ideal sf reader, never mind writer, is something of a Renaissance person I feel free in casting a wide net for books to review.

Gunston's book is one of an excellent series of military reference volumes published by Salamander in Britain and Arco in the United States; accurate, clearly written, lavishly illustrated, and remarkably cheap for what they offer. Gunston, one of the world's best and most original aviation

writers, deals with the next generation of combat aircraft, both those coming into service and those still under development. He points out that the fighters going into service in the 1990s are likely to be the last generation of combat aircraft designed to operate entirely within Earth's atmosphere.

For the generations beyond that, we have the collaboration between Myrabo, an aeronautical engineer, and Ing, here wearing his futurist's hat. They have digested an enormous literature into a very good nontechnical summary covering every form of atmosphere and space vehicle we can reasonably expect, short of a revolution in physics that would give us antigravity.

Personally, as an aviation buff I've found both books entertaining reading. As a writer who wants to depict the skies of the future plausibly, I've found them virtually indispensable.

*Visions of the Universe* is a showcase for the astronomical art of Kazuaki Iwasaki, one of the few astronomical artists who can be mentioned in the same breath with Chesley Bonestell. With Asimov's text, written in his best popular-science mode, the book is a dazzling tour of the universe from the sun out to remote galaxies, based on the latest knowledge available in 1980. Even at its full price the book is worth considering; picking up a used copy I consider my best book-buying *coup* so far this year.

*The Film Encyclopedia* volume devoted to sf really lives up to the term. It covers every significant sf, fantasy, and horror film produced anywhere in the world from 1895 to the end of 1983, with basic data for all and at least one illustration for most.

Hardy and his contributors haven't avoided all of the standard critical clichés, such as the Ameri-

can horror films of the 1950s being a metaphor for Cold War paranoia. They're still refreshingly free of ideological filters or Procrustean schemes of analysis. While it would be a misnomer to call a volume of this size, weight, and price a "handy reference," for all but the most demanding film buff it will replace a whole shelf of lighter (in several senses of the word) volumes.

# EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO: SHARK DESTINY

by  
Terry Rich Hartley

Some years ago Larry Niven mentioned that he was getting a dollar a word for novels. One would-be writer overhearing the conversation took out a dollar.

"I'll buy a word," she said.

Larry thought long and hard about a word to sell her. It wasn't as if she were a *publisher*. This was a fellow member of species *escritor*. Finally he decided: *rishithra*, a word from *The Ringworld Engineers*. It means "sex outside your species."

Fan began to make up rishithra jokes.

"Rishithra?"

"Yes, but may my relatives watch?"

or

"Rishithra?"

"Yes, if you can stay under water for fifteen minutes."

or

"Rishithra?"

"You have an insufficient number of orifices."

I recall many years ago the first time I took a small sailboat out in a storm. It was dangerous. One mistake and we would be in the cold water of Puget Sound, with no more than fifteen minutes to be rescued or die of exposure.

Even in the army I had never felt so alive.

Terry Rich Hartley thinks that perhaps we were not all meant to love one another, except in the sense that flesh is heat, and we enjoy that love we feel as we kill or are killed.

—JEP

# SHARK DESTINY

Terry Rich Hartley

The thrusters of my Nike sky-cutter are silent now. One of her six suction tubes is already connected to the soft underbelly of the exhausted valkyrie it took me three days to catch. Focusing one lens at a time on the video display screen, I maneuver twin hand sticks until the studded disk at the end of each tube is fastened firmly to the valk's fibrous skin. Triggering my cutter's vacuum drive, I feel the heady rush of adrenalin at kill number 131, and exhilarate knowing that when my connected storage tank is full of compressed hydrogen, I'll be on my way to harbor. Just let me deliver the tank to orbiting station six and it's furlough time for this shark.

Soon, after the thrill of chase and coup de grace, I'll settle into a doldrum, suffer withdrawal. I'll want to relive the find as much as the chase, craving to spot my prey with its intrinsic camouflage, outwit its every evasion, and stalk it with spine-

wrenching maneuvers downward toward the chaotic cloudbanks of Saturn, where I'll slip beneath its massive, formless body and herd it up and away from safety.

Utopian doctrine lists the valks as insentient, natural-formed balloons, but we skysharks choke on that. Sharks know their prey—me, most of all, considering I'm second in total kills (first still living). That the valks twist, turn, and perform looping 360s because of magnetic repulsion to pursuing cutters is a lie, at best, but the Commission's voter sensitivity muzzles us. We stay silent while their truth-manips convince Earthlivers that violence is extinct. Ah, yes, a conflict might upset utopia. Who cares? Earthlivers are cowardly wretches, anyway, accepting lies rather than facing an upset of their status quo, which is plush, apathetic, and idealistic.

But how will even the truth-manips explain away changes I've been witnessing in the valks? How will they rationalize that more than a few of these nonliving gasbags are becoming increasingly aggressive? With lies, of course, or outright censorship. No matter. Three more kills and I'm undisputed champ—probably last champ of a dying breed.

On Rhea I'm known as a hard-drinking, stone-fisted space demon, and I prove it this visit, first thing. A sailor—a bosun mate from the *Taura Lee*—suggests that my profession's on its way out—moribund.

"Do you say that when your ramjet's fusin' hydrogen I risked my butt for?" I counter, along with a left hook that drops the son-of-a-foul-union to his knees. I garrote him until my nose tells me he's disgraced himself, then release my chain belt and

shove him to the floor. Prong with a skyshark, you get his teeth.

I down a double shot of scanitol and order another "scat" as a policeman comes from a dark corner and pulls the gasping bosun to his feet. Wisely, the enforcer ignores the PB gun handle protruding from my jacket. Lethal weapons are outlawed except for lawmen, but he knows that a shark won't give one up without death being a part of the process—most likely, his death. He knows, too, we're too damned essential and too damn few. A kind all our own, we're called reckless and suicidal, but it's always said with respect. They know who supplies fuel to the interstellar fleets. No, he won't fight me. He understands I'm of a special breed.

Damned progress! Damned antimatter engines! How much longer can we be needed?

Watching as the policeman leads the beaten sailor away through a dilation passage, I down some rusty liquid and think of the next hour, when I'll meet Cindra in a sensory room high up in this domed city. She's back from a kill, too, furloughing here, and we are keen to meet after austere months. We'll talk little, just gaze at each other at first. Her flowing hair will cascade down her body like a molten river of gold pouring upon a bronze goddess. Her soul-sucking eyes will call me to a body that ripples like a she-leopard from incessant workouts in the isotonic minigym aboard her cutter, *Amazon*. We'll float on an air cushion and watch Saturn in her ever-changing swirl, mostly yellow with darker hues melting in and out. The rings were insignificant from here—Rhea is on the same plane—but too much visual is disturbing, anyway. We will steam and shower and abstain food and drink for 80 hours, as well as ignore the lust caps



provided for those undisciplined dullards who compose most of humankind. We'll climb back on the air cushion and master Kama Sutra.

On the bricked patio outside Stacey's (he's a mercenary miscreant—I like him), Cindra and I sit back in bodymold chairs ravishing fresh lobster from his brine tanks and washing it down with homemade wine. He has a grape arbor in the countryside—underground, with artificial light. The potion, headier than Earth wine, is undoubtedly boosted with ethyl. I doubt if this place is legal—no license has ever adorned the wall, and enforcers steer clear of here, even with all the gambling and lewdness that goes on inside. Stacey probably bribes them, the black-eyed, leather-faced, hoar-capped descendant of Odin himself. But, what can you expect from an ex-shark?

Cindra hasn't been the same this furlough. We've had two sessions in 10 days, and each time, I've sensed her mind has slipped from bliss to . . . where? "Okay," I say, "now we can relax and talk. What's the trouble?"

"No trouble."

"The distraction, then?"

"I'm just caught up in the change—the valks."

"Ah, yes, the valks. Used to be rare to find one that'd turn on you. Not so anymore, huh?"

"I came back empty mission before last, Tyler. You were working Ten Sector then, I think."

"Nobody's successful one-hundred-percent of—"

"It's the reason. I was moving in on a big one, better than 200 meters across, when it turned on me with its mouth gaping—just like when they skirt the skies feeding on hydrogen. I don't know what would've happened inside it, but I wasn't going to find out. If nothing else, it could hold me

forever, unless I wanted to fire my thrusters and become a supernova."

"That isn't what happens," I interject.

"Anyway, I'd been out five weeks, and all the maneuvering of the chase and escape left me too short of fuel to— How do you know what happens?"

"Thought you'd never ask."

"Smartass!"

"The *Cerberus*. I saw her."

"She's reported missing, last I heard. Where?"

"Inside a valkyrie, almost completely . . . digested? My tank was full from my last kill or I would've tried to drain the valk. There wasn't any use just draining it off into space because I couldn't have saved Shylo, anyhow. The only thing not totally dissolved was his sky-cutter's figurehead with its trio of muzzles. Seems those gas bags are more complex than even we know. That would've taken a strong chemical."

"Maybe . . . No, foolish thought."

"What?"

She comes as close to a blush for her as I've ever seen. "I started to suggest you report it. Forgive me my moment of insanity."

"Insanity, indeed!" Declaring that valkyries are living is the ultimate, unforgiving heresy for a shark. Politicians don't like to be embarrassed with truth when a fib will paint a better image.

I slug down my last glass of wine while Cindra stares vacantly at my chest. I press a five-spot scrip onto a sliding tray and watch it disappear before another liter slides out of a blue box by my chair. I liked it better before Stacey modernized the place and he'd come out himself, barrel-bellied under a stained, white apron, always with a story to spout in his baritone voice. Too busy these days. *Too busy these days*. The patio is filling up now,

mostly with sailors and merchant marines on stop-over for the distant heavens.

I lean back, gaze through the dome to golden Saturn, and try to wish backward 10 years. Stacey had just retired from sharking and had opened his haunt; built it with his own ham-sized hands, slag brick by slag brick. He'd be out there spinning a great yarn while a bunch of us renegades would be sucking it in, along with copious amounts of scanitol and black ale. The future was endless then and I didn't have this nagging fear. Not fear of harm. Hell, I'm a certified born bastard in a bastard profession. My only real fear—dread, actually—is the conversion of the starsystems fleet to antimatter propulsion. It's happening now. I'm a dinosaur. The *Taura Lee* will depart soon for the outpost at Proxima Centauri, then the *Lady Reina* and *Empress Sharada* somewhere else, followed by only 15 or 20 more. Hydrogen ramjets are like sailships of yore, and skysharks— Well, you're not likely to find any whalers except in *Moby Dick*.

"It's time for you to retire and see your family on Earth," I offer, expecting an outburst. I get one.

"Earth! Sissified, citified, powderassed Earth! What would I do there, Tyler, join a sex service, for chrissake?!"

I laugh while those closest to us join in. How they'd like to see two sharks locked in combat! And they know we're sharks. We get our name not just because we're predatory, but also from the sharkskin jackets we wear, always bulging with the outline of a particle-beam gun.

"You'd make a million," a drunken marine howls, then warily staggers away under the glare of her flaming azure eyes.

"We're going to be forced out soon, anyway," I continue. "You've got family. I, well, this is all I've

got so I have to hang on." I'm lying now. I wouldn't retire if I had 5 million krone in the bank and 40 aunts and uncles to visit. As it is, I've got the nether side of 50,000 krone, *Jagtooth* (my Nike sky-cutter) is clear, plus one very ancient (if still living), sanctimonious orphanage director to call "Mother." The old bone always sat with her nose in the air like something in her lap stunk—something probably did.

"I'm too removed from everyone and everything else, Tyler. Besides, I'm here by choice, not chance. And, as for being forced out—something, somewhere will come along. Maybe we need to move on to another star system."

"Maybe," I mutter, not believing. I wish she'd quit. It's getting more hazardous each time out. Cutters are disappearing at an ever-accelerating rate (11 last quarter alone). A decade ago the figure was half that, usually because of collisions during the chase or someone zealously following his target into Saturn's blinding, unforgiving atmosphere. No one's returned from that mistake. And, before we installed auto-shutoffs, more than a few sharks overcompressed their hydrogen tanks and became instant space debris.

But now, it's the valks themselves. I've witnessed it for some time—this ominous social evolution. They're roaming in ever-larger packs, with the more aggressive ones protecting like bulls in cattle herds. After spotting the *Cerberus* and hearing Cindra's story, I have to be the total believer. We surely caused it. They had no natural enemies before us—no catalyst to force them into a defensive posture—but they've learned. Fleeing and death are synonymous when you face a predatory enemy faster than you are. I'm certain they're becoming a fight-beats-flight species.

I've heard old-timers tell of rare occurrences when a valkyrie would roll to expose its cavern to an attacking cutter, but there were so many passive ones then that those old sharks wouldn't waste time on the troublemakers. Getting back with a full cargo was what paid, not playing games of out-battle the gas bag. To my mind, these beasts have learned from the fighters among them.

Learned? Ponderous thinking like this is for biologists, not sharks, but they'll never be called in. After all, valks are nonbiological. And if I report differently? Well, it's okay for the Commission's lackey administrators on Rhea to denounce me as mad, but they'll try to impound *Jagtooth*, too, and that'd bring rivers of blood. Better to just keep tabs with my own kind. It's certain to be over in less than two years anyway—dammit!

*Jagtooth* carries me along now at quarter throttle, her snarling figurehead biting through space. I've been out for nearly two weeks, Cindra and *Amazon*, four. I needed the R and R, but feel like a ravenous predator again. Cindra's been on radio silence for two days—not unusual if you feel close to a pack. Valkyrie are sensitive to radio. It did catch a transmission from the *Schrew*, inbound from a successful hunt. Delos said he'd encountered a huge pack outside the orbit of Enceladus—precedent-setting, to my knowledge, considering they'd ceased such distant roamings when humans began hunting them 40 years ago. I've set *Jagtooth's* course ahead of the last sighting and figure Cindra's done the same.

Straining at the isotoner, sweating, I perform situps at three g's and remember the last two weeks of furlough. *Jagtooth* was being refitted—a major overhaul—and, with Cindra gone, I settled

for less—two moon-eyed flowers on excursion from Belgrade U. Pitiful. Why don't people practice? They were untrained, undisciplined, and may as well have been comatose. Even wearing lust caps they lacked imagination and stamina. One Cindra to 20 of those—30!

I left them after two days, sparred at a martial studio, and worked out in the new Joshua Compu-physiogy. It was great! I drank scanitol and wine and plunked oysters from Stacey's brine tanks to swallow them alive and cold. Another young warrior asked to be humiliated by pulling a barbrope on me, but I just stared him into submission instead. I'm either getting soft or smart. Both are disgusting.

Before she launched, Cindra brought me back to reality concerning any thoughts I had toward her retirement. A seasoned hunter, her addiction is as strong as my own, and I can't expect her to accept a typically mundane existence after completing 54 kills in seven years. I'm one of the few that has lasted longer than that—six years longer, to be exact. We agreed that, with the vawks becoming increasingly more dangerous, attacking them was becoming equally more thrilling, and that our experience guaranteed us the lion's share of bounty over all others in supplying the last of the great hydrogen ships.

But still, we must find another market. Sharks that don't swim, die. And to die in a sea full of prey is a disgrace. While predation has been heavy for decades now, the vawks haven't dwindled in number, leaving us to believe that they reproduce, ameba-like, while under Saturn's ever-opaque cover. Inexhaustible supply, no demand—no sharks.

I glide from the isogy and lock myself in the sprayer. My body glistens in its shiny walls; my

face looks younger than a month ago when I was so tired. I am 41 and can probably live another hundred years if I keep shaped up and don't get traumatized, as they say (killed, as I say). But, who's counting, I think, sudsing my heavy black beard and hair into a white froth. Where to sell the gas? Maybe we hunters will be so few the market will hold. Hah! They already manufacture enough cheap H to supply the short-haul merchant marines, and the long-haulers will certainly convert just like the military. Now a thought flashes into my head—no, a realization! The face smiling from the wall, glowing, looks half my age.

I'm tracking now—sighted the outlines of four vawks in my scanner two hours ago. I'm closing to cut one loose. They are immobile—a sagacious ploy, since I am above them and it's like trying to spot cellophane in front of a colored, high-intensity bulb. I rocket beneath them and ascend toward the second largest (just right for my tank). Its maw is wide open, filling the sky as it postures threateningly. I jockey to one side of the opening; it twists to devour my cutter. Outjigging it, I punch *Jagtooth* against its skin—panic!

It shoots straight up from the small pack with reflex-numbing speed. Not enough. I follow. Twisting, twisting, a sharp 90 and my g-trousers squeeze, my heart pounds. It loops to attempt to dive for the planet but *Jagtooth*, relentless, intimidates it back outward from safe harbor. Around Saturn we hurl, my cutter positioned beneath it to cut off access. This will continue for bone-withering days before I move in, but its fate is written in blood. Or is it? A coded ELT alarm! *Amazon's* in trouble! Cindra!

I blow the empty tank loose, adjust the controls

to lock on her signal, then flatten into the seat like a grape in a wine press as *Jagtooth's* engines fire full out. My computer indicates her position as being 2.263 kilometers beyond the orbit of Tethys and I wonder what ill happenstance could take place in that benign territory. Scanning back, I see that my almost victim is preparing to dine on the discarded hydrogen tank. My anxiety to reach Cindra suffers a manifold increase.

An hour passes; her emergency locator transmitter is screaming—close! Fine-tuning the scanner, I'm stunned by the outlines of the biggest valkpack ever. There must be 30—no, at least 40—of the colossal brutes. There's *Amazon*, trapped in the hideous mouth of a titanic malignant cell. That cancer of the sky has plugged *Amazon's* thrusters and Cindra can't blast free.

I lance toward *Amazon* as two aggressors break from the pack, each the size of two soccer fields, charging *Jagtooth*. They eclipse my cutter, a bare 14 meters by 5 without her tank. Undaunted, I press head-on, then perform a twisting roll and knife between them. Without my exterior cargo, they're no match. The g-trousers, like constricting serpents, force blood up from my legs to end a moment of dizziness. I roll more gently and brake, stopping *Jagtooth* 20 meters from Cindra's stuck cutter.

Frantically, I lock all six suction disks on the valkyrie's belly and throw the pump switch to max. My shield slides back, allowing a clear view. I stare in horror out of the port bubble at *Amazon*, two thirds ingested, and realize *Jagtooth's* pumps can't possibly bleed the killer valk fast enough. I tear at the g-suit that is glued to my sweaty flesh, curse, and hope that I can climb into a skinsuit fast enough to reach her. "Jesus christ almighty!"



I gasp. Reflex springs my hands up as if to block a punch. A hatchcover has blown from Amazon and whirls past my window close enough to grab.

Cindra's silver figure slides out and I realize the nude tits on *Amazon's* figurehead are inferior caricatures indeed. Ecstatically, I reach for the vacuum bay switch and wait for the *on* light to come to life. I extend the jointed arm from the emergency compartment just above the switch and sight the cross-hairs in its circled end to a point one foot over Cindra's head. The lifeline fires true.

Hurry! I mentally scream, sensing a malevolent shadow closing upon us. Cindra barely passes through the airlock when I rudely shove her into a sideseat and hit the thrusters. Out the bubble we gaze into the vast cavern of an attacking malignancy just as it's closing upon us. The suction disks must hold! They do! We spin our kill around as a shield and rotate away to safety. This one's a dead valk—number 132.

Cindra is silent and heartsick as we follow the pack on its journey outward. *Amazon* was part of her and it's unsalvageable. Stealthily, we cruise behind the valkpack as it soars toward Dione, far from its habitat, and I feel a shiver at the sinister challenge. *Challenge—my addiction. Challenge—all that life is.* Soon, the pack slows and I pilot *Jagtooth* a thousand meters over it, roll for vision, then press to the front. Cindra moans something about the Commission—that it will never issue a permit to construct a new cutter, not this close to conversion.

We glide over the unmanned lab, *Vespid*, that orbits close to tiny Dione and I'm thinking that Cindra is nothing without the hunt. I was a fool for ever wanting her to quit. Two valks have closed

upon the lab's twin orbs, melting over them like hot slime. I feel alive, more alive than ever. The insight that had flashed into my mind in the sprayer couldn't be clearer than right now.

"Cindra," I say, "Chin up. The valks have evolved; so have we. We're soldiers now, not hunters. You'll get a new cutter—*Amazon Two*, if you like. And we'll be sharks until we die as sharks."

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO:  
"GOLDEN DAWN"

by  
Ronald Anthony Cross

The trouble with freedom is that it's so much . . . *trouble*: nobody to tell you what to do, so you have to do what you think best; nobody to regard you as a valuable property, so you have to take care of yourself; nobody to imbue your life with meaning because that's *your* job. Freedom, as opposed to license, implies a great deal of skull sweat and other forms of hard labor. It is not for sissies. But the compensations are transcendant, for the strong.

—JPB

# GOLDEN DAWN

Ronald Anthony Cross

## I

### *Cowboyton*

I felt the tingle, like a light touch of static electricity up the nape of my neck, when the big flashy male bashed through the swinging doors so hard they almost went through the walls. The tingle meant: Look out, Goldie, things are starting to go wrong.

My sis, Blue Ice (yes, our parents had followed the then-prevalent, now already fading, fad of naming us ethereal nature color names, she Blue Ice, me Golden Dawn) was still talking to the bartender when the big man swashbuckled across the room and pounded on the bar, "Set 'em up Joe." The clown.

I should have paid more attention to the tingle. It's always right.

I was watching him, pretending not to watch

him. There was something about his act I couldn't buy.

Of course everybody's acting here. That's what festival is for. This was my first time. I had always avoided it like flu—well, since I became old enough to attend, anyway. You have to be fifteen, because from what I hear, some pretty rough stuff occurs with everybody throwing out their inhibitions and dressing up in costumes and all.

So I've only avoided it once. I'm sixteen. But I would have avoided it this time too if it hadn't been for Sis. Especially Cowboyton. Why did Sis's grungy new boyfriend have to pick Cowboyton for their rendezvous? I detest cowboys. Not that real cowboys were much like these guys, I should imagine. I don't really know, I'm not a history buff.

Sis had started back across the floor to me when the big muscular guy tossed down a straight shot of something harsh, stepped back and shook his head like a dog. "Whoa," the fool shouted. "Git along little doggie. Hit me again, Joe."

Everyone else at the bar was into his own act; that's festival for you. You can keep it.

Sis sat down at the table and tried to tell me what she'd found out from the bartender, but they were all making so much noise at the bar I could hardly make out anything Sis was shouting at me. The whole scene was so ridiculous: Sis, the family beauty, dressed up in a cherry red cowboy suit (red shorts, boots and halter), peeking out from an enormous wide-brimmed hat, also red.

And all these silly full grown men dressed up in cowboy suits and yes, there were cowgirls too, and dancehall girls and whores. And there I was in the middle of it accompanying my frantic sister on her mission to warn her new boyfriend about something. And she wouldn't tell me what it was.

She leaned closer to me, still shouting, and I caught the word "nothing."

"He didn't leave a message?" I shouted back at her. She nodded, then shook her head. She was starting to cry.

"He said he'd be here, didn't he?" I shouted, trying to distract her.

She nodded, shouting something else, again lost in the cloud of noise pulsating from the bar. The boys were really getting loud.

I tossed an aggravated glance their way, just in time to see the guns come out.

"Get down," I shouted (of course she couldn't hear it) and dived out of my chair.

And now the big guns were going off; a brief eruption of stunning concussions that rang on in my ears long after it was all over.

I just lay there under the table, where I had scrambled like a cockroach, listening to my ears ring, and trembling. I'm very sensitive to noise; the only things I'm really interested in are my music and fencing.

When I crawled out from under the table, there I was, staring at a pair of big bright yellow boots. I looked up and up. It was the big guy who'd given me the tingle.

"Gee, I'm sorry honeylamb. It was an accident. I just—gosh, I'm sorry."

There were three bodies down on the floor. One of them was Sis. Blue Ice was quickly turning ice blue.

But she was still talking as she faded right before my eyes—more like whispering. I waved the big guy off and got my ears, still ringing, damn it, as close as I could.

"... like real death, I suppose. How silly, I don't know how real death—oh, Goldie, is that you? I

can't see, everything's fading, I feel like . . . Oh, no. Promise me you'll find him. Promise me. Oh, no. Damn it. The letter's in my . . . Promise me, Goldie."

I promised.

"The letter's in my bag. Don't read it. Just get it to him, find him. Oh damn it, Goldie, you promise me."

I promised again.

"Don't read it," she said.

"I won't read it," I said. "Goddamn it, I'll find him. I just don't know . . ." I started stammering. She faded out and lay still.

"Come on, let me buy you a drink. It's not that bad, she can come again next year. It's only a game," the big guy said. I realized then that I was crying. It was too much like real death. I guess that was the point.

"Carry her and the other two outside," the bartender said, "her sis can wait there with her for the pick-up."

A look passed between him and the big cowboy that I pretended not to notice: something shared and secret.

"I'm taking my drink with me," I said in a defiant tone, still snuffling.

Outside in the dusty street, drinking my whiskey sour and talking to my sister's corpse, I found myself feeling more and more like a little girl and less and less like a young adult.

"I just don't know where to find him. Where to start, damn it. All I want to do is go home and switch on the orchestra and work out that underwater movement in my new Symphony of the Elements." (I am generally considered a musical genius.)

I drank down my whiskey sour and went through Sis's tote bag and fished out the letter. At least this boyfriend could read.

"Sorry Sis," I said. "No way out, I've got to do it." I opened up the letter, at the same time trying to wave the flies away from her lovely dead face. An old cowpoke came riding down the dusty street strumming on an out-of-tune twangy guitar and singing, "I'm an old cowhand, from the Rio Grand," wherever the hell that was.

The letter was addressed to Antonius Rex Greene. I blinked and read it again. Antonius Rex Greene, it said again. What a name. This was the guy she had called Tony?

It read:

Antonius my love always—

I am writing this letter at the risk of losing my job. I cannot do otherwise. I still love you, no matter what. I'll be giving this to your new lover, the cold one, to carry on to you.

Your brother's out. Somehow. Even the Castle couldn't hold him. They're hushing it up here, as heads will fall if it gets out they let anyone escape from the country's most high security prison-mental institution.

Dominicus hasn't changed at all. He's still obsessed with the idea of murdering you. He pretends to himself that it's because you were the one who turned him in to us, but of course it goes deeper than that. He hates you for stealing the love from your parents he believed belonged to him. For being the fair child, the one who did so well in school, in life. He lives only to destroy you. One of the last things he said to me before he escaped was that he would never be able to breathe freely until you stopped breathing altogether.

Of course, they're doing everything they can to recapture him and still keep it all under wraps, and they probably will. I've warned



your new girlfriend to keep her mouth shut and get this letter to you or she'll probably wind up locked up somewhere and gagged till the whole thing blows over.

But meanwhile, get out of the festival and I'd suggest clear out of L.A., maybe get over to the Lesser U.S. for a few weeks and lay very low.

Bear in mind that your brother Dominicus has numerous connections to the underworld network. A stay at a place like Lifehome Castle only enhances these connections, as you have probably heard. Trust no strangers. Let me remind you, in case you have forgotten, that of course he knows you are at the festival as you wrote and told him so.

Yes, I confess it. I read your letters to him. I guess in my own way I'm as obsessed with you as he is. As I suppose your new Ice Blue lover is also. No wonder he hates you so much that he chokes on it.

I read your letters, I even try to get duty with Dominicus as if to be near him is to be nearer somehow to you. The other nurses think I'm crazy, as of course they're all terrified of that ugly demon, they're only too happy to trade him off to me. And of course, he knows. "My brother's little spy," he calls me, among other less complimentary names.

Sometimes I wish that I had never met you when you first came here to The Castle to see your brother. But then I did meet you. And so am always yours,

Laura

I folded up the letter and slipped it in my pack.

Between the whiskey and the letter, I wasn't crying anymore. I felt numb.

Lifhome Castle. I didn't know people escaped from The Castle. I guess that was the point.

I heard a slight whirring noise and looked up. I was startled to see how close the craft was. I snatched Sis's wallet out of her tote bag and quickly pilfered what cash she had there.

"Don't worry," the male nurse told me, misreading my confused expression, "she'll be good as new once we get her back and revive her, it's just a sedative."

"Can't you make an exception and revive her here? Oh, please. It's an emergency." But I could see by his expression that it was no use. He was probably so used to turning down this request that he dreamed about it. Nightmares.

"No way, never," he said, "festival rules are inviolate. You get killed here, you're dead until you're outside and home, and you don't get back in again this year."

As they picked up the pseudo corpses and loaded them in and whirled away I just sat there on the curb cursing L.A. Only in L.A.! When I was old enough to live alone I promised myself I was moving out of L.A. somewhere into Lesser America. No more Festival City. No more Disney Peninsula. Just ordinary life. Of course everybody who lived in the Lesser U.S. packed up and headed for Festival City during the festival months. I would be left there all alone. Playing my symphonies on my electronic orchestra. Fine!

"Sure I can't buy you a drink or something? I feel mighty bad about your sister. Ruining the festival for both of you. You know, it just got out of hand. Those kind of things happen during festival."

He was talking sweet, but he was looking mean. Smart. Smug. Too big. Too mean. Too muscular to be an ordinary guy. I remembered the part in Laura's letter about Dominicus's underworld connections. I remembered the look that passed between him and the bartender. I remembered that creepy feeling on the back of my neck. And I didn't believe that he had accidentally shot my sister in a drunken brawl.

But I tried not to show it. I just looked into his eyes and opened my eyes wide, like my sis Blue Ice would have done.

"Maybe I'll take you up on that later," I said, "right now I have to be alone. You know."

He looked surprised but pleased. "All right," he said. "Later." He went back through the swinging doors and I got up and walked down the dusty street, looking at the quaint old-fashioned wooden buildings, until I came to a shop that had a much weathered handwritten wooden sign that read "Guns—Shooting Irons—Peacemakers," and in smaller letters underneath, "Don't go naked, go armed."

The old guy on the horse was still singing away, strumming on the old guitar. But no longer drifting, he and the horse had found a place in the shade of an overhanging roof a little ways down the street and planted themselves there. There was something touching about the earnest untrained way he went at it, and I could almost understand how some people could actually enjoy folk music. I don't. It almost made me feel as if I were in a 3V drama and he was following me around providing the musical score and verisimilitude at the same time. He had switched from, "I'm an Old Cow-hand," to "Home, Home on the Range," with awful sincerity. To a gifted performer on the electronic

orchestra, listening to folk music was like watching two skinny little ninety-year-old men in a wrestling match—painful! I went inside to buy myself a shooting iron.

"Planning on shooting some poor cowpoke, little lady?" the old fart behind the counter quipped.

"That's it," I said, looking over the assortment in the ancient glass-covered display case.

"Let me see that one," I said, choosing one of the smaller ones that looked as if it would fit my hand. It was surprisingly light.

"Jest like the originals except that these here are quite a bit lighter. No one wants to lug one of those heavy old irons around during festival."

I seemed to recall that something similar had been done with the costumes we were all forced to wear. I was wearing what they called jeans, and a red polka-dot handkerchief bra. An authentic western outfit, I am told, but the jeans are made out of some lightweight synth or other. I remember hearing that they used to be coarse and stiff and quite uncomfortable.

"How does it work?"

He laughed out loud, a high cackling noise. He looked like he was one of the skinny ninety-year-old men I had imagined in a wrestling match a few minutes ago. Wiped out and ancient, but still full of pizzazz, as we say in the Old West.

"I got me a real killer here," he said in his cracked happy voice, "a regular Belinda the Kid."

I glared.

"OK. OK. Hold your horses. Let me see, what was the question, better yet, what was the answer? Ha ha.

"O.K., it goes like this. The projectile hits, breaks, a nerve gas penetrates the skin and pow, instant paralysis, a smaller projectile penetrates deeper

with a fast-acting sedative. The electronic beeper you had implanted before you could enter the festival picks up the change in body signs and broadcasts. The hovercraft picks up the signal and—"

"No, no, no," I said, "I don't care about that, I mean how do you work the gun?"

"Hold your horses, young lady. I gotcha. I'm jest now gittin to that. First you have to understand what happens when the bullet hits: instant paralysis, followed by gradual loss of consciousness.

"O.K. You cock it like this. And pull the trigger." The crazy old fart just blasted away right into the walls. The gun went off with the same awful crash that left me standing there shaking like a leaf, ears ringing, swearing to myself.

"Well, I can see you're going to need a leetle more help," he said wryly, noting my condition.

"Please, just do me a favor," I begged, my voice breaking, I seemed to be on the edge of tears again. "Just show me how to draw it out and shoot it. The whole thing. Please, Mister, I don't know anything about it at—at—" I choked up.

He took down a holster and buckled it on. It had a synth-leather thong at the bottom that tied around his thigh. He tied it. Then he jerked the gun out and fired it. He was surprisingly fast.

"Slower, please." I was getting interested now.

"Your thumb goes over the hammer like this, in the holster. Then when the gun comes up she sort of cocks herself—see?" I saw.

He did it again.

"Aim right at a man's belly button," he said. "And try to squeeze on the trigger. Don't jerk it too much.

"Even so, you're gonna jerk it some, and probably you're gonna hit high, and a little to the left. Most righthanders do. That's why you always aim

at the belly button. That's the most room for error, see. Only on 3V they shoot each other between the eyes. Bullsheets—excuse me, young lady, but that's what it is. Your professional always aimed for the middle of a man. That way if it goes a leetle high, fine, and if it goes a leetle low—ouch. And you got a leetle room on either side.

"Now, here's some ear plugs, I don't need 'em, I'm damn near deaf anyhow. Now you try it."

He got down a fancy-looking holster off the wall and I buckled it on. It fit.

"That one's fer kids, shorty, that's why it's got all those birds and flowers and shit all over it. My guns here in this case are all loaded with target rounds, so don't worry about that. Just aim into that dude up there on the far wall and let 'er rip."

He had painted a crude figure of a man on the far wall in white paint.

At first I just moved my hand very slowly to the gun in the holster. I could tell from watching him that the most important part of the whole process was getting your hand in the proper position with the thumb just right.

Then I took the gun out in very slow motion and thrust it out straight into the target and let it cock itself, and then checked the sights to see where I had wound up. Too far to the left, I figured, but just a bit. I straightened out my arm and sure enough, that was it. I had to thrust my arm out all the way straight.

I could see the old guy open and close his mouth several times as if he wanted to say something, but he held back. He could see something was happening here that he couldn't quite get.

I drew it carefully in slow motion three more times, uncocking it and putting it back each time until suddenly I felt it click into place. The same

way you feel it click into place when you are struggling with a difficult passage for the orchestra and keep getting tangled up in the keyboard, or the luteboard. (Unlike most composers, I like to use both. I feel there are certain operations you need to tease into the orchestra through strings, instead of just punch it out on keyboards.)

Anyhow, with me, when it clicks, it clicks. I whipped out the gun and fired into the wall. The target round marked a blue spot where it hit the painted white man. Slightly high and to the left of the navel. Just like the old guy said.

He was just standing there with his mouth open. After a pause he muttered a reverent, "Mother of the Gods, I've never seen anything like that in my life. What are you anyhow, some new variety of cyborg supergirl they invented to spice up the festival?" His phony cowboy talk had dropped away, leaving him a fast-talking, crisp salesman-style delivery. Probably he was an out-of-work 3V soap actor who latched onto this character role as a lifesaving once-a-year steady job.

"I'm a master musician," I said. "Fast on keyboards is a lot harder than fast with guns. Thanks a lot though. You showed me the right way. Without that I couldn't have got the idea so easy."

I got some "festival cash" out of my pack and tipped him some.

He loaded the combat rounds for me.

"Jest remember," he said. "It takes more'n speed and good technique to win a fight, or play a great piece of music, for that matter. But then you already know that, don't you?" He grinned so wide I worried he'd crack his face.

"Good luck," he said, as I went out the door.

It would surely take at least that, I thought to myself. I was so scared already that I was a little

queasy. The weird heavy festival foods I had recently downed didn't help. I could feel them churning around in my stomach—veggie T-bone steak, anyone? Goddess! To think that human beings had at one time in history actually eaten the flesh of animals was enough to make anyone queasy.

The old guy on the horse was now going on about "Home, home on the range, where the deer and the buffalo play. Where seldom was heard a discouraging word, cause what could a buffalo say."

His robohorse neigh-laughed, a peculiar sound, a little like the actual horses I'd heard on old films.

Before I went back in the Red Moon Saloon, I got the antidrunk pills out of my pack, popped one, and slipped the rest in my pants pocket.

And sure enough, he was still in there, still drinking hard, only now there was a difference. Now, having accomplished what he set out to do, he was letting himself get a little sloppy. No—he was actually trying to get a little sloppy. I could feel it as I watched him from just inside the swinging doors. The feeling of having just downed people with a gun was intoxicating his soul, and he was drinking heavy to let the rest of him catch up with it.

I ignored him and sat at a table. I drank a couple of whiskey sours. I knew he'd show up, he had to. It was my sister he had blown away. He had to gloat over that with me. And besides. I'd seen the way he looked at me. A lot of big loud guys go for sixteen-year-old girls. And I'm pretty cute, if I do say so myself. Cute hell, sexy. A sort of tomboy type, but with a lot of electricity. The whiskey sours were obviously getting to me. I popped another anti-alcohol pill, and just in time, because I saw him heading over.

"Promised you another drink, didn't I, little



lady?" He sprawled in a chair and stretched like a cat getting ready to pounce on a mouse. His eyes seemed unnaturally small and bright. And he was glowing with confidence.

"Sure, why not?" I said. "Buy me two." I figured the pill would have counteracted the alcohol I had already consumed by the time I got into the next.

But when I was a little girl and had asked Daddy what the festival was, he had answered that it was a time when everything people held hidden deep inside came out. A time when none of the rules we had become accustomed to, built our lives on, worked. When nothing worked.

And so it was. Nothing worked. Sis was gone. And it was only later that I realized that what I had thought were the anti alcohol pills were actually pain pills: Sis, who suffered from tension headaches, for some unknown reason had stuffed her pills in my pack. Much later I found the anti-alkies buried under my spare socks.

And so we both got drunk, real drunk, he from overconfidence and the crazy exhilaration that comes of killing another human, even in make believe, and me because I was too disturbed to notice that I had been popping little yellow pills instead of little white ones.

I will say this, however. The pain pills mixed with the alcohol lent a kind of shimmering physical ecstasy to the high that seemed to dissipate all my insoluble problems like smoke in a windstorm. After the second sour I felt great. I felt better than I ever had in my life. It was like an instant leap from anguish to ecstasy with nothing in between. I felt bold. I leaned across the table and put my hand around his and slowly pried it loose from its drink. He thought I wanted to hold his big grubby

hand. But as soon as I got his hand loose I captured his drink and took a big hearty slug of it. This was no whiskey sour! I choked on it.

"Slow down there, little lady. Whoa. You're about gettin ready to get sick all over your red polka-dotted little tits and pass out on me," he said in a semiworried tone of voice.

"If you keep sweettalking me that way, honey, I'm liable to slip out of my britches right here in front of everybody."

He looked suitably shocked.

The strange combination of painkillers and alcohol had moved me into an extreme state of detachment, the like of which I had never experienced before. Anything goes in this one, I said to myself, and I meant it.

I leaned across the table (I had to stand up to make it, and steady myself by grabbing his hair), and gave him a big loose wet sloppy kiss with a lot of tongue in it. He gasped. His beady little eyes opened so wide they almost popped.

And so a few minutes later both of us were making our way outside on very unsteady legs. He had his massive arm around my shoulder and half the time it seemed to be holding me up and half the time it seemed to be pulling me down.

"We better pop a few anti-alkies up in my room or we won't be able to tell who's doing what to who," he drawled. I laughed. I was feeling so good even he seemed funny to me.

"Mine don't work," I said, and realized I'd made a mistake by his expression.

"Come on back here in this here alley, honey, for a minute and let me show you something. Really." I was pulling at his hand.

"Whut?" he said in a sullen tone.

"Believe me, honey, what I'm going to show

you, you want to see." I let go of his hand and walked into the narrow alley between the bar and the building next to it.

Suddenly, something pushed me hard from behind and I smashed into the wall and fell over on the ground and then arduously struggled back up to my feet. I had the sensation that everything in the universe was spinning, moving away, and that being sober was only the illusion that it was not. It was then, with a chill of paralyzing fear, that I realized how drunk I was. All the confidence hissed out of me like air out of a balloon.

"Now let's quit playing games and let's find out what all this is about," my big brutal cowboy lover was telling me in a stonecold sober tone of voice.

He smiled an evil smile—the smile that knew everything—and said: "My anti-alkie pills do work, you see.

"Now, your seductive siren bit could use a little work, about ten years of practice, I might say.

"But you're going to tell me what's going on here, and you're going to tell me all of it, right now.

"And don't think I didn't notice the gun and the silly toy holster that's magically appeared strapped around your sexy little waist, too high, I might add. I wouldn't live long, playing with the boys I play with, if I didn't notice those kind of things.

"So don't go imagining you're going to beat me at that game, you little bitch, because this is real life and not a 3V melodrama, and you're just a drunk little teenage bitch, sick to death with fear, facing a full grown man.

"And I'll tell you what I'm going to do to you. If I have to shoot you, I'm going to go over there and take this gun and turn it around and pound on

your face with the handle. I think I'll just break an arm or two while you're laying there in the dirt unconscious. Get the picture? This is real, babe, so just unbuckle that belt real slow and then you and I are going to have a long talk."

For a moment or two I thought I was going to pass out, whether from fear or drink I don't know. Then I felt my stomach rolling, but I held it back somehow by an act of will.

I wasn't seeing two of him, as the cliché goes, but I sure wasn't seeing him right, either. I was seeing everything the way you do when you get off one of those rides at an amusement park that spins you around and around.

He's right, I thought for a moment. I can't make it. He's a full grown man and a tough brute. I'm just a kid.

Then suddenly out of nowhere it was like when I was giving one of my concerts. You know it's impossible, nobody can play that piece, nobody can run that one passage without tripping up, it takes a miracle. So you count on a miracle and you get a miracle. That's the law, known by everyone who's ever played a great difficult impossible piece of music and pulled out of it something extra and wonderful that wasn't ever there before. That's the miracle I was counting on now. That's what art is all about.

"Funny, I was planning the exact same scenario for you," I said, surprised at the steadiness in my voice. "You won't look so big laying down there with me restructuring your ugly face with the butt of the gun. So tell me now, where do I find Antonius?"

He smiled, shook his head. "O.K., you little bitch," he said, and he started to say something else but

I'll never know what it was because I went for the gun then, and he followed suit.

In the dim light of the alley it was impossible to tell what stage he was at, I could only see his arm moving fast, and let my own body perform its chore at its chosen pace.

For that brief moment, the drunkenness and fear were set aside and it was almost as if I were watching another person, astonishingly fast, yet unhurried, take out the pistol and pop off a round into the big man's belly.

Of course I couldn't see it hit, but the effect was instantaneous. His whole body jerked and he must have been very fast because he got off a wild shot right after mine. Then he flopped down over backwards into the dirt.

All of his nerves twitched for a few seconds and then he went limp. I remembered how fast Sis had faded out.

I rushed over and forced myself to bop him a light one on the nose with the gun. I almost threw up, again.

"I'll break both your legs, you son of a bitch, as well as rearrange your whole face. Listen, you creep," I added with cruel inspiration, "you think you're tough, you couldn't whip my grandmother. You're so slow—" I rapped him again with the gun. He still hadn't said a word. I was starting to wonder if it was too late when he whispered in a harsh low voice: "Elfhome. He's hanging out at the Bluebell. Using the name Adonis. Don't . . . don't hit me anymore. I—just don't."

His voice faded out. Suddenly I was sick. I threw up once, and got up and started to walk away and then had to get down on my knees in the dirt and throw up again.

I went through his pockets and found his anti

alkies and managed to gag a couple down. Then I squatted there beside him for a while to let my stomach settle.

When I stood up I felt much better. I was seeing clearer too. Everything in the alley was somehow brighter, the phony old-fashioned trash cans, even the shadows, were cleanly etched and somehow meaningful.

Faintly I could hear someone, maybe the same old guy, singing "When I was a cowboy, out on the western range." It sounded eerie and lonely and beautiful to me.

I looked down at the gun, still in my hand, and felt a thrill run from it, through me. I had just killed a man—almost.

Elfhame, I said to myself. Adonis of Elfhame. Figures. It is a time-honored custom to choose a new, romantic name for the festival, signifying, of course, that you intend to behave like a different person, but "Adonis of Elfhame"? Well, anyhow, anything will be better than Cowboyton.

But as I walked out of the alley and back onto the board walkway, and saw the old wooden buildings etched against the bright night sky, the warm lights in the windows, the roboponies tied to the hitching posts, moving restlessly, tossing their heads, and listened to the sounds, and the old cowboy singing about his battle with Jesse James, "Come a ki ki yippie, come a ki ki yippie yippie yea," and the raucous shouting and saloon noises, the hoot of the (mechanical?) owl; when I felt, heard, smelled and saw all these things and they seeped through the pores of my skin and mingled with the strong mixed-up new sensations stirring around there, I had the feeling that maybe I was some lonely desperado, some tough kid too young to be on her own, that had nevertheless just killed

her first man. What was it the old fart had called me—"Belinda the Kid." I smiled.

The mechanical owl hooted and after a brief pause hooted again. In the distance I could already hear the whirring of the approaching hovercraft homing in on my victim's body.

I had a lot to do tomorrow, and suddenly, just as the pills seemed to fight off the effect of the alcohol, a wave of achy weariness washed over me. I staggered back to my inn and barely made it onto the bed and pulled off my boots. The second one made a strange muffled sound as it hit the floor, and I was already changing it into something else in the rambling pattern of my thought, which was rapidly turning into a dream.

By the time I woke up and dragged myself out of bed it was afternoon. I was feeling nervous, but optimistic. The way I saw it, the worst was over. All I had to do was get to Adonis-Antonius at the Bluebell Inn and then warn him, and I was done with it. A simple chore. Yet I had the feeling that I couldn't really relax and enjoy myself until it was accomplished. And it didn't help to picture Sis. She was probably just now coming out of the sedative at whatever med center they cart them off to. I didn't recall how long you're out for, although they tell you all that stuff before they let you in here. But I could easily picture her making a quick shift from unconscious to panic. I tried to picture what she would do. No way she could get back in. Would she give in and go to the police? The letter said that that nurse—what was her name?—Laura—had warned her against it, but the warning seemed to me to be unconvincing. I decided that what she'd probably do would be to persuade one of her friends to try to do what she'd been trying to do when she was so rudely interrupted by a bullet.

Good luck! I didn't envy whoever it was, the task. I figured they'd probably hang around Cowboyton and get no farther. Then, of course, it dawned on me. As I was leaving the inn I spotted the old cowboy that rode around all the time singing. He must have parked his horse and guitar somewhere because he was just sauntering down the board walkway looking things over. I left a message with him for someone who would be asking around town, especially the Red Moon Saloon.

"Adonis, at the Bluebell in Elfhame."

He looked puzzled. "That's it?"

"That's it," I said.

Why, he'd be happy to help me, "little lady," he said. He certainly looked happy. Simple, old-fashioned songs were running through his head, and he figured that was enough. Maybe he was right.

Late afternoon I caught the stage to the monorail and rode the rail into Elfhame.

## II

### *Elfhame*

This was more like it. I was decked out in shiny gold tights, high black boots and a loose white silk shirt with a kelly green sash wrapped around my waist. I wore a pointed hat, gold to match the tights, and this time I was armed right at the start.

I had chosen a straight slender sword. It was no foil, still, it was amazing how light and resilient it was. There were longer swords and broader swords and curved ones. But this was more like what I was accustomed to. I also wore an elegant slender dagger on the other hip.



I was feeling pretty cocky. When I wasn't working on my music, I was usually working on my fencing. It was my way of staying in shape, mixed of course with a little running. There was almost no one nowadays who didn't run. I wasn't as great with a foil as I was on the keyboard, but I was good enough, I felt, for anything likely to come up. Fencing, after all, wasn't exactly the national sport. In fact, when you thought of it, it was amazing that a small group of people from virtually every country on earth would feel drawn to avidly pursue it centuries after it had any validity in real life. This group never seemed to change much in size or dedication or even in type: we were definitely a certain mix of athletic-intellectual and romantic nature.

What I hadn't taken into consideration was the difference between fencing as a sport, and fencing as a fight. In short, I made the same mistake I had earlier made with guns, only more so. Would I ever learn? Obviously not.

So here I was strolling along, feeling my oats as they used to say, wearing a sword, my first choice among weapons.

It was already just turning evening—they had delayed me further at the check-in station, arranging for my choice of costumes to be shipped on ahead to the Bluebell Inn.

And this place was it for me. To hell with the Old West. Elfhame was one enormous garden and city all mixed up together. Little gurgling brooks crawled under bright red bridges. Flowers of all sorts—many varieties I had never seen before—were everywhere you looked. Happy people in pretty bright clothes were strolling about the shiny yellow pathways or sprawled out contentedly on the lawns.

Round bubbles of houses peeked out of the shrubbery here and there, and off to my right I could make out the myriad spires of a large but delicately wrought castle.

A fairy in a transparent gauzy gown, with gossamer wings, walking arm in arm with a giant panda, waved hello to me.

I stopped them and asked them the way to the Bluebell Inn. The guy in the panda suit gave out the directions while the fairy, naked under the light veil of gauze, smiled a poignant smile.

When he was through talking, she suddenly put her delicate hand on my shoulder and gripped it with surprising strength. She spoke to me in a high bright voice: "Tonight will be the full moon. Nothing shall be as it appears. Beware, little mortal, of that which you fear the least."

"I don't understand," I said.

"A fairy's gift is never understood," she said, "until after, when it's too late. That's the charm and the pain of it, mortal." She laughed gaily in her lovely light voice, and they strolled on arm in arm. It wasn't until they had dissolved into the darkening sky that I realized how astonishingly beautiful she had been.

By the time I reached the Bluebell Inn it was completely dark. Bright little sparkly lights had come on in all the trees, bushes, and flowers all over the park, and everything glittered.

Someone was playing lovely, haunting music somewhere on a lute (yes, that most magical instrument of all instruments, I shall always love the most, regardless of the growing tendency for me to resort more and more to the use of keyboards).

It was a weird, wild strain of music, constantly shifting and changing, as restless as the wind, so that even I, with my composer's ear, couldn't pin

it down or remember it later. It came up like the wind and died away like the wind.

Handsome lords and ladies in flashing bright attire glided past me, elegant as swans. And the rich heady scent of myriad flowers mixed together and carried to me on the summer wind seemed to be subtly transporting me into a state of translucent intoxication.

It was no longer possible for me to pretend to myself that I was remaining somehow magically unaffected and aloof from this one: this one had me!

And when I arrived at the Bluebell Inn, our lady the moon was riding full and high in the night sky.

Too intoxicated to go in, I sat down at one of the brightly lit little outdoor tables peeking out of the flowers and ordered a glass of fairy mead—whatever that was.

It was somewhere during that first goblet of heady fairy mead that I saw him. And instantly I realized who he must be.

I had been glancing about from table to table, sneaking a look at all the high lords and ladies, when I caught sight of the most gorgeous young man I had ever seen in my life. I practically choked on my drink. It was too much, after all I'd gone through, that Antonius-Adonis should look like this. I had no doubt that it was my sister's boyfriend, the one that nurse Laura was risking her job and throwing away her pride to save. The one that my sister lost her breath over every time she tried to speak his name. The one that had to be sitting there across from me, smiling that arrogant smile of the young god, on this night of nights: it just had to be him.

"Waitress," I held up my goblet, "more mead." I drained half the glass at once, feeling for some

reason both melancholy and expectant at once. And unable to pin down the reason for either emotion.

It's probably not him, I thought, it's probably just some other young Adonis dressed up like an elfin prince, waiting to drive every woman in the world into a frenzy of anguish and desire.

"Waitress, more mead, please." I raised my goblet, empty so soon?

For some reason unapparent to me, now that I had found him, and my mission was so nearly complete, I was assailed by a mysterious surge of apprehension, a reticence to actually go over and confirm his identity and give him the damn note and be done with it. Try as I might, I couldn't seem to goad myself into getting out of my chair. And as drawn to stare at him as I was, I was feeling mysteriously self-conscious about the whole affair. I definitely didn't want him to catch me staring.

And so I looked at the other people dining and wining at the other tables, at the flowers, the sparkling lights, the moon.

Good thing I did!

I spotted three brutes strategically situated at the table behind him and felt the old tingle playing with the back of my neck again. These guys were of the same breed as my desperado pal back sleeping it off at some med center: too strong, too alert, and just plain too mean looking to be a couple of young engineers escaping it all at a once-a-year bash.

They seemed to be studying something that the middle one was holding, then looking at young Adonis for confirmation.

Whatever it was, he fit it, because all three got up at once in a brisk businesslike manner, and to

my horror, without any attempt at hiding their intentions from the surrounding party-goers, they just carefully and quietly took out their swords and advanced on his table from behind. I guess they figured the party revelers would just accept it as festival playfulness. Of course they had figured it right.

I was so shocked that for a brief hysterical moment I was afraid that I would just sit there unable to speak, and have to watch them take him. Then I heard myself shouting, "Antonius, look out behind you," and suddenly found myself on my feet. My sword made a rustling sound coming out of its scabbard. Here we go again, I thought.

The swords of course would not kill or wound you. They were only dangerous if you caught one in the eye, and the blades were made deliberately wide enough so that was unlikely. The blades would retract. All except for the tiny needle in the tip, which administered the nerve chemical and the sedative. The effect was essentially the same as being shot in Cowboyton. Though I've heard it's neither as reliable or as swift-acting when it takes effect. One way or the other, I would soon find out.

Antonius flowed out of his chair with a nonchalant feline grace, and threw his goblet, wine and all, at the nearest of the three.

He threw it hard and straight, with the kind of arrogance that seemed to imply that he had never even considered the possibility of missing. He didn't.

The man shouted something unintelligible and lurched sideways. For a moment I thought he was going down, but no such luck.

And now Antonius had his sword out. A slightly longer version of mine. He waved it at the three thugs as if to say, come on, you're keeping me waiting.

But I tried to get to him as fast as I could because this was no 3V show, and one man doesn't hold off three in real life, not even two.

Immediately, the one nearest me moved over and cut me off.

"Just hold him, and I'll take care of her. Then I'll get back to you," he shouted. He even smiled confidently as he advanced on me. Just a cute little teenage girl, he was thinking.

And I realized with a thrill that they had just made a crucial miscalculation. The plan should have been for him to have fought defensively and held me off while the other two finished off Antonius as quickly as possible. This way, if I could drop my opponent, the odds would be even, and they would have thrown away their insurmountable advantage. Hang in there, Goldie!

I tried to look scared—easy—and backed awkwardly away from him, waving my sword clumsily, like I didn't know what to do with it. I heard the first clash of swords. This had to be quick.

My man advanced swiftly, rather too swiftly, in a kind of low shuffle, more facing me than usual, a little more like a knife fighter than a fencer. First I took heart, then I saw the reason. He had a dagger in his left hand, Italian style.

I reminded myself quickly that this was not going to be a fencing match, then I dived in.

The swords hit hard, harder than foils, I almost lost mine—no delicate fingerplay here—and he tried to charge right in and come to close quarters where he could use the dagger, but I backed off circling slightly left and half-lunged, backed off quick and drop-lunged, all the way.

For a moment he stood there with his sword up above mine where it had failed to capture, his

mouth open wide in astonishment, then he swayed, toppled, and crashed across a table.

The people around us were rapidly getting up, carrying their drinks and moving nonchalantly off to the sides to form a circle around us. They doubtlessly thought this was a staged show, and I could hear a spattering of applause for my performance.

Now that the awkward act was over, I drew out my dagger with my left hand and ran to join the main battle.

Apparently Antonius had been backing up, weaving around the tables and covering a lot of territory.

I had hoped to catch one of them in the back, but they had been keeping track of our battle while only halfheartedly pursuing Antonius.

Now, of course, they realized their mistake—too late. And we paired off, me with the short muscular one and Antonius with the tall thin one.

Before I closed with my man, I saw Antonius close with his and I caught my first glimpse of what a real swordfight between two strong men was all about.

Antonius wasn't much of a fencer, but he was quick as a cat and surprisingly strong for such a slender man. Both men ignored the long-range fencing and slid down the long swords to close quarters, trying to use the daggers right away.

That was the kind of fighting I had to avoid. As we clashed swords I caught a glimpse of Antonius pushing his opponent over an empty table, and rushing after him like a terrier after a rat.

Then I was backing up as fast as I could and using every foil trick I knew to keep my man from getting to close quarters with me, because he was a little bobcat, solid muscle packed on solid muscle. As he came after me, he came grinning. A

shock of short white bristly hair somehow accented the meanness in his grin.

I realized that despite all my skill, my chances of emerging from this scuffle a victor were slim or none. Once he got inside my blade, he'd break my neck.

And suddenly without my knowing how, it happened. He surged inside and while I jabbed frantically at him with my dagger, he pushed off hard with his sword and sent me crashing into a table, and before I could get my breath he closed again and this time pushed me so hard I virtually flew backwards over a chair, landed on my back, scrambled up on one knee, and thrust my sword out in front of me, hoping to luck out and hit something. I caught nothing but air, then there was a loud clash of steel and there I was with nothing in my right hand: disarmed. Like a phony old-fashioned movie he had knocked the sword out of my hand.

I tossed the dagger into my right hand and knelt there waiting for the final assault. For a moment he stood staring down at me, smiling his thin-lipped smile of victory, then suddenly the smile tightened and his body stiffened up. His fingers twitched spasmodically and the sword fell out of his hand. I caught sight of a figure behind him, settled into a loose semilunge position. Then Antonius thrust the little white-haired bobcat disdainfully aside, crashing into a table, and reached out a hand to me. I realized I was still pointing the dagger.

When we got up and started to leave, people applauded. Antonius took my hand and bowed elegantly. "The girl's very good," one man shouted, as I retrieved my sword and pack and we left the area.



"You bet she is," Antonius replied, looking at me with those great dark eyes wide and unblinking.

"Let's go up to my room where we can talk," he whispered. "Who are you anyhow? Are you Blue Ice's sister? Of course you are, aren't you? The composer? I've seen you on 3V. You're even more beautiful than she."

I almost choked on that. No one, but no one, had ever said that to me before. Blue Ice was so elegant and graceful: a perfect match for Antonius, I thought. Was it possible that he really saw something in me that others couldn't? Something just blooming or about to bloom?

Once in his room, he paced back and forth, reading the letter. Which he read twice before crumpling it up and tossing it onto the plush red carpet.

"So he's out," was all he said about it. And then he turned and walked over to me and took my face in his hands and held it there. His large dark eyes held me the way a cobra holds a bird with its deadly glance. And I guess I must have been feeling my drinks again because something was sure making my thoughts scatter, my resistance drain, my cheeks hot, and my legs weak.

Like a zombie, I felt him leading me to the huge round waterbed, and then he sat me down on the padded railing. I felt him pull off one of my boots.

"Your brother," I protested halfheartedly.

"Nobody can get to us here," he said. "Doors are locked, phone's off, there's plenty of food in the fridge room. We'll just climb into this big warm waterbed and hide out for a while."

And I noticed up close he had a round button dimple in his chin that appeared when he smiled. He was smiling now.

"Let's," I said, not knowing what I wanted to say, "let's not—uh—"

He slipped my tights down over my hips, my zombie body lifted up of its own accord to help him, and then he leaned over and knelt down and took my foot and ran his hand up my foot, my ankle, my calf, my thigh and on into that warm wet place between my legs that right now seemed to be where I lived, and suddenly my body wasn't a zombie anymore.

I didn't know what time it was, or how many times we had made love or how many times I had climaxed or said I love you; I was existing in the world of the senses, outside of time and measurement, for the first time in my life. I now understood why women like my sister and that nurse, Laura, were willing to crawl after him on their hands and knees.

I was only sixteen, of course, and I hadn't had many lovers, but I was totally convinced that no one outside of Antonius Greene was worth ever bothering to make love with again.

I stretched languidly on the bed, feeling it ripple as it settled in around my body, and listening to it slosh.

Antonius came in bearing a goblet, sat on the edge of the bed and handed it to me.

"Festival love potion," he said. I took a swallow—delicious. "Where's yours?" I said, "My Adonis."

He smiled, chin dimpling. "I already had mine. I'm going to shower. Be out in a minute." He got up and went into the bathroom. I took another swallow and sat the goblet down on the table by the phone. I was sitting up now on the padded bed rail, and something, perhaps only some obsessive nervous twinge, made me lean over and punch the phone back on. I picked up the goblet to take another drink, and immediately the phone buzzed.

I plucked it up, afraid he'd hear it, although that was unlikely over the noise of the shower. He had said to leave it off.

"Yes," I said.

"Who's this?" a female voice I didn't recognize asked me.

There was a pause. Then: "It's Laura. I have to speak to Antonius. Please hurry, it's important."

You can't call into the festival from outside, so that meant she was here.

"This is Blue Ice's sister," I said. "Where are you calling from?"

"Downstairs," she said. "My letter?"

"I got it to him, everything's fine now," I said. I was getting nervous as hell with the thought of his former lover right downstairs and me sitting here on his bed stark naked waiting for him to come to me out of the shower. I took another swallow.

"Thank God," she said. "Listen, you're sure it's him?"

"Of course it's him," I said in a somewhat irate tone. I was hoping she'd finish with it all and hang up before he got out of the shower.

"But then what about Dominicus? It doesn't mesh. He's just plain disappeared, and no one's got a hint of where to. He should have surfaced somewhere by now."

"I don't even know what he looks like—except that he's a dog," I said.

"A dog?" she said. "What?"

"Your letter. You said he was so ugly that the nurses were afraid to . . ."

"I meant that his soul was ugly. He's stunning. If anything he's even more great looking than Antonius. The nurses are afraid to go near him because he's so wicked and at the same time he's so

gorgeous. Those big dark eyes and that dimpled chin. He looks like . . ."

"What color are Antonius's eyes?" I was clutching the phone so tight my forearm hurt.

"Blue. A light clear blue. Listen, there are supposed to be three undercover cops here at the Bluebell keeping an eye out for Dominicus if he does show. The hospital called them in and convinced them it's best to handle it quietly. One of them's a short guy with a lot of muscle called Whitey. You'll spot him hanging out with the two bigger guys. If you see anyone who . . ."

I dropped the phone as if it were red hot and had just melted through my hand like butter. I backed away from it breathing hard and loud. My thoughts were going every way at once. I heard the shower go off in the bathroom. I broke and ran for the door, naked and all. Oh my God, the door's locked, the door's locked, it will take his voice-print to unlock it. But I just stood there jerking at it, wheezing. I was actually wheezing as I saw him come out of the bathroom, walk over, pick the phone up, listen for a moment and then deliberately drop it back down on the carpet again and turn to me.

"Your drink," he said. "I drugged it."

And suddenly on top of my other panic I realized what had been taking place that I had been ignoring. I was swiftly and inexorably becoming very very stoned. I was suddenly swept with such a wave of vertigo that I had to hang on to the door handle to keep my feet. I rode it out. I only drank half of it, I thought. I can fight it off.

He advanced slowly to me, smiling his beautiful cat smile. I let go the handle and ran across the room and yet somehow I also was on the carpet next to the door with my eyes closed, and the last

thing I realized before I blinked out like a light was that it was only in my mind that I was running across the room. I really was just lying there dreaming it.

### III

#### *Inner Elfhome*

There was no ability to move, but consciousness was there. Not self-consciousness, just consciousness. The lovely sprawling room with the soft flowing red hill (it was only later that I realized that to my unfocused eyes the sweep of red carpet away from me, by some optical illusion appeared to be angling up a steep incline), the deep red-filtered windows, the delicate nude body of the golden-haired girl in the red squish chair, wearing nothing but a tall conical dunce cap—how poignant—were all the consciousness there was, without any intruding thoughts or questions. And of course the two men, chatting in the center of the room.

Gradually, after an eternity of nothing but room consciousness, something began to nag about the girl in the chair. Something about her was so familiar, and evoked from time to time a strong surge of feeling from some unknown, dark well.

Me, I thought. The naked girl in the chair, wearing the dunce cap, was me. Then I began to separate out some other elements of the still life. I was looking into a large mirror, watching myself contemplating the room. Leaving on my long pointed hat must have been a joke, I thought. On me.

"Of course somehow he's tricked me again," one of the men was saying. "Otherwise he'd be here by now, God damn it. Wouldn't he? Where the hell is he? Why doesn't he ever do anything the way I

plan it out? Why has he always got to throw me somehow or other?"

"You're just being paranoid," the other man was answering him. "He'll show. Just wait it out. He's got to show. He rented the Goddamn room six months in advance, he's got to show, doesn't he? After all, if he was on to you, don't you think the boys in blue, holding hands with their nasty little friends in white, would be here by now with their butterfly nets?"

Something about the scene, which seemed to me to be an unassuming little play acted out for my benefit, was wrong. I had to figure it out. Then I had it. The two voices were one and the same. What I had thought were two men talking to each other was one man carrying on a conversation with himself. Now I was impressed not only with the wit and spontaneity of the dialogue, but also by the humor inherent in the conception of the piece: I was so stoned that everything about the scene seemed somehow perfect and inevitable: this was now, the only now there was, the only way things could be.

"And this thing with his girlfriend Blue Ice, pretending to be her little sister Golden Dawn. It's got me all confused. Is she who she says she is, or is she my brother's girlfriend infiltrating me as some part of one of his devious, scheming, rotten . . . What the hell does it mean?"

"Stop it," he answered himself, "you're giving me a headache. What's the point of figuring it out? The girl's here, you've made your move. Nothing to do but wait."

I would have laughed at the cleverness of it all. He thought I was Blue Ice. And I would have told him that I wasn't Blue Ice, but I couldn't talk

because—why? I had taken a drug. He had given me a drugged drink. How funny!

I must have drifted off for a bit because when I came back again, things didn't seem so funny to me anymore. And his constant dialogue had shifted into a different area. "You miss the point, you knave, of course her eyes are open. If she closes them, that would mean the drug is wearing off. After all, she drank a whole goblet of it. She'll be out for a week. In fact, she'll be out forever. As the saying goes, she'll never see what hit her." He laughed—too loud.

He thought I had downed the whole drink, but I had only sipped at it—hadn't I? Where was it? I tried to remember, and strangely enough, in my drugged state, I could remember the whole scene; or rather, I actually saw it in its entirety, as if it were taking place now.

The phone! I had been sipping the drink when the phone buzzed. I saw myself set the goblet down on the table next to the phone. Then I was back listening to the one-man dialogue again. Of course, by now he was off on a completely different tack. One I was very familiar with.

"It's torture being the younger brother," he was ranting. "No matter what you do the bastard's always one step ahead of you. Scheming, planning, conniving his way into your parents' good graces, while setting you up to take all of the falls. And there's nothing you can do about it. That one step ahead is just one step too many. He's too much smarter. Too much bigger, just too God-damn naturally dominant. He takes it for granted that he's the little god and you were invented to serve him as a sort of combination court jester-whipping post, for all eternity. They call that the sibling bond."

"You're right, there. Be an only, but if you can't be an only, be first." I had startled both myself and him by suddenly speaking out loud.

"And listen, I'm not Blue Ice, believe me, I'm her little sister, and I know what you're talking about, it's terrible, no matter what you do they're always ahead of you, taking everything you want. There's no way out of it. None. Killing him won't do you any good at all. You have to find something of your own. Like I did with my music. And then go with it. Killing won't—"

"Nevertheless, he dies," Dominicus said, and then, quite unexpectedly, laughed heartily.

"Don't you see, it's so funny, I don't know what to believe anymore. He's done it. All of his schemes and plans. I don't have the faintest idea whether you're who you say you are, or his girlfriend Blue Ice, or perhaps even someone else entirely. After all, everyone's under his dominion; let's face it, he has supernatural powers. Even the nurses at the Lifehome Castle were agents of his."

Laura! I had been talking to Laura on the phone. Had she pieced together what was happening here? But if so, how much time would it take her to do anything about it? The three local enforcement men were out of our little drama for good—I had helped put them there. There were no official police at the festival. It would take time. Much time.

I got up out of the chair. If I could talk, I figured, I could move. But my legs gave way and I spilled over onto my hands and knees on the red carpet. It felt like soft furry tongues swallowing up my hands to the wrist and caressing my calves and bare feet. My head was swimming with weird disjointed thoughts. I wanted to just give up, lay down, let go. No!

"Listen, I need a drink bad," I said. "Could you



pour me one, please? One of those strawberry fizzes. No dope like the last one, okay?"

"What's the point?" he said. "You know what I have to do. Blue Ice, Golden Dawn, whoever you are, you're his. Everybody I ever want is his. And I'll get him. Oh yes, he dies. But first, I have to deal with you. Whoever you are."

"Please get me a drink. Make both of us a drink. Why can't we be civil about this? We're both here together. Why can't we be pleasant about . . . about everything."

Panic was sobering me up fast. Or at least it was changing the high into something quite different. My heart was pounding so hard I was certain I was going to have a heart attack and end it all ahead of schedule. Would that further confuse him? It would me.

"Why not?" he said. "Why not have a drink and be civil about the whole thing?"

"A drink will probably bomb you all the way out, on top of that drug I used on you," he answered himself.

But he moved over to the bar and started mixing the drinks.

I got up to my feet. Dizziness receded. I tried to take stock of my possibilities. I was naked and I was attractive to him—he had proved that.

I went over and took my drink from him, careful to touch his hand lingeringly as I did so. I smiled at him, a tense smile I'm sure.

We touched drinks and sipped them.

"You're wrong about me, Dominicus, I'm not his, I'm yours. I am Golden Dawn, not my sister Blue Ice, and I'm yours, haven't I proved it to you?"

He snorted. "That's some proof. No, I hardly consider that sort of thing proof of your affections.

They all want to do that with me, and then they betray me. That means nothing."

"It meant something to me," I said. And then I must have been glancing unconsciously toward the phone table with my drugged drink on it, because he said: "Don't start thinking about the phone, because I've disconnected it."

Go for it, I told myself. And before I could think over what I was about to do, I walked directly over to the phone and sat my drink down on the table next to it—next to the drugged drink he had given me earlier. I picked up the phone and put it to my ear. "Dead as a doornail," I said, wondering as I said it what a doornail was. I smiled, put the phone back down, and picked up the wrong drink. My heart was hammering so hard in my chest I felt sure I was going to faint. Had he noticed? He said nothing.

I wandered slowly, and, I hoped, sensually over to him, pretending to sip from my drink.

"No, listen to me really, Dom, you've got me wrong. I'll never betray you. Here, put your drink down and kiss me." I put mine down on the bar, put my arms around his neck, pressed myself into his body and kissed him a light but wicked open-mouth kiss.

He allowed me to place his drink on the bar beside mine and kiss him again, this time a long, tonguing kiss.

"I'll never betray you," I whispered. Then I picked up his drink, and waited for the most important thing in the world to occur—could he not see that I was about to collapse in terror? Did he read that for passion?

He picked up my drink. He picked up my drink! I clinked the glasses together. "Bottoms up," I leered, "in more ways than one." And I slugged

my drink all the way down, almost gagging it up as I did so.

How much of his drink had he downed? I couldn't be sure. He was still holding his goblet. He set it down on the bar. Picked it up again and looked at it.

My heart was pounding so hard I felt that even he must be able to hear it.

He finished the drink!

"Whew," he said, "heady." Then: "Look, what's the point? You know what I've got to do. What would be the point of it?"

He was holding something in his hand. I don't know where it came from. It was an old-fashioned pocket knife. He was opening the blade.

"No, please," I said, "I love you, Dom, I'll never betray you. Please."

"You'll say anything," he said. "Don't you think I know that?" He took a step forward, I took a step back.

"But what about the door? The lock, you know, the voiceprint? How did you do that?"

He smiled, pleased. "Not all that difficult, really. I have friends knowledgeable in that area. They merely added a tape of mine onto what was already there before—a tape of his. The door will open to either of us."

He moved forward a step and I moved back a step.

"Wait," I said, "I've got to go to the bathroom."

"What?" He was laughing now.

"Really," I said, "I've got to go to the bathroom. If you don't let me go, think what a mess I'll make all over the rug and all. It will be so terrible."

I was backing away. He was still laughing, advancing slowly, casually.

All at once he lurched forward and caught a hold of my wrist.

Oh dear God, this is it. I threw myself backward, but he held on and then . . .

Quite suddenly I realized he wasn't holding on anymore. He was down on the rug on his hands and knees. His head was down, his hair brushing the rug.

"I'm sorry I had to do it to you," he said.

I half swooned, but somehow I caught myself. My hand rushed to my throat, but I was fine. Then I realized the drug had hit him and he was hallucinating that he was following through with things: it seemed to be some particular quality of this drug.

I got down and picked up the knife where he had dropped it.

"That's all right, lover. I only exist to fulfill your paranoid whims," I said.

"Oh no," he mumbled. He was going fast.

"Oh yes," I said. "This time I drugged the drink."

I stood there and watched him until he went all the way out. It took quite a while. Then I folded the knife, and almost folded myself. Now the effects of alcohol on top of the drug were bombing me out.

I probably should have found something to tie him up with or cut his damn throat, or at least tried to find a way out. I do remember trying to reconnect the phone, but he had disconnected it for keeps, it seems.

When they broke into the apartment and found me, I was playing the old-fashioned piano in the living room. All kinds of ideas for my *Symphony of the Elements* were blazing through my mind. I was still alive! And I was going to finish it!

And the famous Antonius was with Laura and

the enforcement crew they had managed to scrounge up somewhere.

It turned out that the handsome Antonius had been shackled up all the time with some other amorous festival participant he had picked up somewhere along the way. The "your place or mine" had luckily for him been hers.

I remember his handsome concerned face as he expressed his undying gratitude to me—"Anything at all." And was it the drug fueling my imagination, or was that gleam in his eye more than just gratitude?

"No, thanks," I said, "I don't need another gorgeous lover in my life right now. I've had quite enough of that for a long, long time. I just need my keyboards, and some peace and quiet."

So I wasn't surprised a few months later when Sis came into my room and interrupted me while I was composing (definitely forbidden behavior).

"He used me and then he junked me. Just like that."

"What do you think his brother did to me?" I said. "Come on, Blue Ice, that's what they do."

"Men?"

"Men. Women. People. That's what people do, if you let them."

"But you got over it so quickly," she said.

Which was not really true. Because, in a way I would never get over it. But which in another way was true, because I was well into my symphony now, and I was not pondering the past.

"What can you, what can you . . . ?" And then she broke and cried and I held her in my arms. Big sister wasn't so big after all.

What I couldn't tell her was there wasn't anything you could do at all, except just don't be a weak person. Okay, I promised myself. That I won't.

# EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO: COPS AND ROBBERS

by  
S. M. Stirling

Observe history objectively and you will reach an unpleasant conclusion.

Freedom is rare. The natural state of mankind is not democracy, nor yet liberal aristocracy. The natural state of mankind is bureaucratic empire, what Wittfogle called a "hydraulic empire" and Marx called "the Asiatic mode of production," with a state bureaucracy controlling employment; a state in which, as Trotsky observed, "the government is the sole employer, [and] opposition means starvation."

The natural size of such empire is the world: that is, it grows until it runs up against another empire of the same nature. This is the grim world Orwell described in *1984*.

The Founding Fathers of this Republic knew all this. Look at the Great Seal of the U.S. "Novus Ordo Seclorum," a new order, a new age, they proclaimed; and they meant it. S. M. Stirling, a Canadian writer, looks at another possibility; one not ruled out as a future.

—JEP

# COPS AND ROBBERS

S.M. Stirling

"Huon II Rex et Imperator." Marylou Stavros turned the quarter-ounce gold coin over in long brown fingers and read the other side. "Imp. Mint Vic. of N. America." Whatever the hell *that* meant.

The Greyhound terminal had the usual early-morning bustle; students, enormous Chicano families with string-tied bundles, and a few of the inevitable Bay area crazies. Marylou felt almost conspicuous in her three-piece slacksuit, but that was Bureau policy.

She grinned, and flipped the coin. Policy would have put this in a plastic baggy, she thought. It's half the evidence we have, that and the locker number.

It had been her idea to scrape the pink-and-grey goo off Carstairs' Apple personal and read the number on the flickering screen. Not as good as getting to him before someone put a soft-nosed slug into the back of his skull, but if anything was going to

break this microchip smuggling ring, this was it. And that would look very good, indeed, on her record. Which would annoy her supervisor. She strongly suspected that, under his high-tech exterior, he was unhappy with the changes since Hoover's day, when the only blacks in the Bureau were glorified janitors and women were barely tolerated as stenos.

She sighed happily and settled into the molded plastic seat across from locker number 73625; there was backup available right outside, but she intended to make this bust herself and doctrine be damned. Counterespionage work was even more boring than her old beat on the interstate hot-car file, and she decided that she had earned a little self-indulgence.

It was an hour later when the suspect walked casually up to the locker. Female, Caucasian, five-eight, hundred and twenty pounds, green eyes, blonde ponytail; windbreaker, Adidas, jeans. Not unusual for the San Francisco area, and neither was the graceful springy movement that suggested dance training. Marylou estimated her age at about 30.

She allowed the suspect to open and clean out the locker; the Bureau had been in before her, and the attaché case held nothing but junk. It was impossible to tell that without laboratory equipment, of course.

Marylou flipped open the leather foldout. "F.B.I.," she said quietly. "Come with me, please."

The other woman smiled, and suddenly the agent felt less happy about what had seemed a routine bust. "I'm afraid that won't be possible," the blonde woman said, in a British accent. "Frightfully sorry."

Marylou was searching for the .32 at the small of her back when the world faded out.



Waking was slow and undramatic. The room was bare concrete, windowless, lit by a single dangling bulb; it held one bed, a washstand, and a chair.

She felt carefully at her head. No dizziness, nausea, or other signs of concussion, and no odd taste in her mouth either, which most drugs would have left. Her clothes were draped over the chair, complete except for the empty holster.

Marylou dressed and sat on the bed, lost in thought. It was difficult to imagine how she had been brought out of a guarded building, with agents staked out at all the exits. Pointless to think about it, she decided: She was here. That might be anywhere from Oakland to the Lubianka in Moscow; that she was alive at all meant that her captors wanted something from her, probably information. It was not a comforting thought; she knew too much about modern interrogation methods, especially the ones the opposition used.

The iron door opened with a clang. Marylou forced herself to rise slowly, face expressionless. Two guards came in, a man and woman, both in baggy grey-green uniforms with archaic-looking high collars. The guns were strange, too: horizontal-drum machine pistols with wooden stocks—large-caliber weapons from the size of the muzzles. The faces behind were blankly impersonal.

"Up," the man said. "You walk ahead, not slow and not fast. Move." The voice had a neutral American accent, which was curious.

Marylou moved to the door, which opened onto a bare corridor. Similar metal portals with peepholes were spaced along it, the unmistakable layout of a maximum-security prison.

"Where are we?" she said.

Without a word, one of the guards hit her under

the short ribs with the butt of her submachine gun—not hard enough to injure, but it winded her. Then both waited with bored patience.

Marylou headed up the corridor. "I can take the hint," she wheezed. The walls were damp, and despite the sough of ventilators, the air smelled musty. She guessed that the prison was underground; the length of the trip when they reached the elevator and started up confirmed it.

The elevator itself was strange, plushly carpeted in red and walled with gilt-frame mirrors; the controls were manual rather than automatic, and she suspected that it rose more slowly than the ones to which she was accustomed. The long journey gave her a moment for regaining self-command, and the sight of her own familiar toffee-colored face was reassuring. Silent, she raised the hawked nose she had inherited from her Greek sponge-diver father and gathered herself.

Girl, she told herself, you are in *deep* shit.

The upper level was a shock. The elevator gave directly onto an office that must have covered most of the floor. One wall was floor-to-ceiling tinted glass; the others were covered with delicate pastel murals of reeds and waterfowl. There were loungers draped in polar-bear fur, a sleek mahogany bar, a Hitachi stereo set, marble tiles on the floor. The desk was huge, and included a modern-looking data terminal. Behind it lounged the woman she had seen in the Greyhound terminal, studying a file folder and sipping at a cup. To one side, an Oriental girl in lavishly embroidered silk pyjamas knelt beside a wheeled breakfast tray.

"Good morning," the woman behind the desk said cheerfully in the same dulcet, aristocratic accent. "Now, agent ah, Stavros, I imagine you think

you are in the hands of, how would you put it, K.G.B. agents?"

"Or East German," Marylou replied. Whatever the purpose of this charade, she was not playing along with it.

"Permit self-introduction. My name is Braithwaite, Colonel Valentina Braithwaite, I.D.S." She paused for a moment. "As to the situation, let your own eyes convince." The colonel's voice shifted to a command snap. "Hayes, Wherstein, take her over to the window."

Dazed, Marylou walked to the glass. It took a full minute for what she was seeing to register. They were overlooking San Francisco, on top of Telegraph Hill and 20 stories up. The geography was unmistakable, but the city was . . . different. The great Bay bridges simply were not there; the street plan was completely alien, planned around the hills instead of against them. The buildings were lower, none taller than the one in which she stood, and mostly in an ornate neoclassical style; the built-up area was far less than in her own city. Out over the harbor floated a . . . blimp? Then it passed over a ship, and the portholes snapped it into perspective; a dirigible, and huge, a thousand feet long at least.

For the first and only time in her life, Marylou came near to fainting. Her stomach heaved, and the air turned black before her eyes. She was vaguely aware of strong hands roughly supporting her into a chair, and a cold wet towel lightly slapping her cheeks. Awareness returned.

The colonel was standing before her. Distractedly, Marylou noted that her uniform was of some fine tweed-like cloth.

"So, we *are* part of a secret service," she was saying. "The Imperial Directorate of Security, loyal

servants of His Royal and Imperial Majesty, Huon II, King-Emperor of Greater Britain." She snapped her fingers. "Mei-ling, bring the tray." Turning to Marylou, she continued. "Now, perhaps you'd like an explanation."

"... ministry of Pitt the Elder, in the 1760s," she concluded. "Now, in your history he fell from power at the end of the Seven Years' War, just when things were going well. Frightening to think how much can depend on one man, isn't it? And his successors bungled everything—the Peace and the Colonial troubles both.

"Here ... and now ..." she waved a hand. "Things went *so* much more smoothly. "It's the *Ten Years War*, to us: Pitt drove Britain on to complete victory instead of a partial one. We took all the French possessions, and the Spanish and Dutch as well: South America, Mexico, the Cape, Ceylon, Indonesia—the lot. The American colonies never became seriously disaffected, after that.

"Since then, we've gone from strength to strength, don't you know. Enough independent revenue made the Crown free of Parliament, so even poor crack-brained Georgie III was able to bring off the coup and make the monarchy absolute again." She smiled wolfishly. "One of the finer things about being in the secret police is that you can say that sort of thing and not be shot for *lese majeste*. Our only real setback was the Great War, with the Russians, two generations ago; both empires fought themselves into exhaustion. Although I shouldn't complain, it was the manpower shortages that changed the ridiculous attitudes toward women that were so common then.

"Then, about a decade ago, the boffins came up with the Translevel Gate." She shrugged expres-

sively. "The physics are beyond me. I took Classics at Oxford. Something about the gravitational warp effects of degenerate matter." She smiled, an oddly charming expression, lopsided and faintly raffish. "One of the few forms of degeneracy that doesn't interest me. And since then, we've been exploring, secretly, trading here and there for things like gold and diamonds, high value in relation to energy transport-costs. Just lately, microelectronics from your world and some 'nearby' ones, better than anything we can make. That was where our contact man made his mistake, paying Carstairs in coin of the realm instead of ingots, as if your people were preindustrial savages. I was sent along to, ah, shall we say, see to Carstairs."

"Why didn't you 'see to' me as well?" Marylou asked bluntly. The situation had sunk in, but she sensed it was only at an intellectual level. Her emotions were unconvinced; they felt numb.

The colonel paused to light a cigarette, and offered the slim platinum case to Marylou. "Tobacco on the right, Sonoma cannabis on the left. No?" She lit her own.

"We thought you might be useful to us. Besides, it would have been just a trifle awkward, blowing your head off right there in front of your confreres, wouldn't it? Much better to have you escort me out." At Marylou's expressions she laughed merrily. "Narcohypnosis, my dear, the same technique we used to interrogate you. You've been here nearly 48 hours, you know."

"And what if I decline to be 'useful'?" Marylou snarled, enraged beyond caution.

The colonel sighed, and turned to the guards. "Hayes, Wherstein, tickle her a little. Mei-ling, more tea."

Before Marylou could move, stiffened fingers

drove into the nerve cluster beside her neck. A hand gripped her by the shoulder and jerked her erect; a palm-edge struck her over the kidney. Paralyzed, her lungs could only make a shivering grunt.

The guards were artists, not sadists: they worked with the impersonal detachment of surgeons demonstrating an anatomical dummy, working to inflict the maximum in pain and emotional degradation without tearing flesh or rupturing organs. And all through the "tickling," she was conscious of the colonel leafing through a file, sipping at her tea, and glancing up from time to time in cool appraisal.

At the end, the guards dropped her into the chair and wiped the blood and sputum off her face. The colonel rose and walked closer, perching one hip on the desk. She spread her hands.

"I am," she purred, "a *reasonable* woman. I wouldn't ask you to betray your country; only to, shall we say, look the other way when activities of ours occur, and furnish us with information. It's harmless. We have enough elsewhere, without tangling with a civilization which is, to be frank, technologically superior in most respects."

Marylou raised eyes blank with hate. "Why don't you use your fucking drugs?" she said hoarsely.

Valentina shrugged. "Oh, well enough for field-hands, but rather obvious if done thoroughly." She jerked a thumb at the Oriental who was placidly brewing tea. "Who's going to mistake that walking lump of meat for a human being? All conditioned reflexes. To be sure . . ."

She drew the heavy automatic at her waist and handed it to Marylou. The walnut butt weighed in her hand; she pointed it at the colonel and pulled the trigger, bitterly expecting the click of a hammer on an empty cylinder—and found that her

finger would not pull. It was eerie, not a dramatic sensation; simply a finger resting limply on the metal when all her will wanted it to close. She swung the weapon away from her captor and it bucked and roared in her hand.

"Careful!" Valentina snapped. "That vase is Ming!" She took back the weapon. "Now, what do you say?"

"Screw you," Marylou replied, conscious of the sweat trickling down her spine. It might be wiser to play along, but . . . no.

Valentina raised an eyebrow. "What a delightful suggestion; I'm sure it could be arranged. Well, we'll just have to try more persuasion. If you prove too, too stubborn you could always join that officer of ours who gave the coins to Carstairs." The baring of teeth that followed was not a smile. "He's now engaged in overseeing coolies in the New Guinea copper mines; they can always use new hands."

She waved a hand. "Take her away. Oh, and tell the alienist we'll be needing him, and the pharmacopia. And prepare the mechanicals, as well."

It was about a week later when they drove up into what Marylou had known as the Santa Clara Valley. She was not sure of the date or very much else. The car was quiet but slow, steam-powered, and she stared quietly out at a landscape of vineyards and orchards interspersed with manor houses and workers' quarters. The mansion they came to was much like the others, except for the guards and heavy power lines.

Inside, she had expected something sleek and NASA-futuristic. Instead, there were banks of ornate brass meters, scaffolds, blue-coated attendants dragging wheeled carts full of cabbage-sized vac-

uum tubes, power lines snaking over flagstones. All it needs, she thought, is Bela Lugosi. Or Gene Wilder. The thought was a first break of light through the grey clouds that seemed to have settled on her mind.

Of course, there was some modern equipment; she recognized the company names: Sony, I.B.M., Texas Instruments . . .

The technician showed Marylou and the colonel to a chalked circle on the floor. Alertness returning, Marylou felt a strange professional note of admiration for the faultless cover of the other woman's dress-for-success business outfit, slightly worn attaché case, and copy of the *Financial Times*.

The colonel handed her the .32, the last part of her original clothing. The technician noted something on a clipboard.

"Right, then, ma'am," he said. "You know about the effect of displacement in transit? Cheerio, then, colonel."

A crackling scent of ozone filled the air. Marylou stood looking at the weapon in her hand.

"I hope you're not considering shooting me with that," Valentina said with amusement.

"Oh, no," Marylou said calmly. "But you forgot one thing."

"Whatever could it be?"

"That guns can shoot something else besides people," Marylou answered.

Even as she spoke, the Imperial agent was turning, lashing out with a bladed palm. But Marylou had already raised the pistol and begun firing into the towering banks of equipment. A giant hand seized them, and the world rippled and twisted apart.



Not having been moving during transition, Marylou awoke first. She used the time well; the colonel awoke with her hands cuffed behind her.

"You stupid blackamoor bitch!" she said. "You imbecilic—"

Marylou interrupted her with a hearty kick to the stomach. "You should have conditioned me against hitting you, too," she said.

"That would have been too limiting, wouldn't it?" she replied sardonically.

Marylou kicked her again, then restrained herself with an effort. Above them, above the canopy of the prune orchard they had found themselves awakened in, a jet went by high overhead.

"Nearer my line than yours," Marylou said. The colonel opened her mouth, hesitated, decided to concentrate on moving, which is not easy over uneven ground with hands linked behind the back.

"I'm sure the authorities will be interested in your story," she continued, prodding the other ahead of her toward the verge of the orchard.

They walked for half an hour before they came to the building. It was a schoolhouse, reassuringly ordinary in whitewashed cinderblock. There were children playing noisily in the yard, and a group surrounding a cluster of teachers at the flagpole. For a moment, Marylou closed her eyes in pure relief.

And then she heard Colonel Valentina laughing, vengeful and triumphant, and opened her eyes to see the tall blonde woman staggering against a tree and shouting with mirth, as the blue and white and crimson flag of the Confederate States fluttered gaily in the bright California sun.

# EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO: STAR WARS IS NOT MAD

by  
James Benford

This is neither the first nor the last word you will read in *Far Frontiers* on Strategic Defense, a.k.a. "Star Wars." Mostly the arguments and questions, both pro and con, right and wrong, are highly abstract. The idiotic "Garwin Curve" is one example. How many laser pulses of what minimum duration must dance on the skin of an ICBM in boost phase to kill it certain-sure is another. What sets this article apart is that it is so very personal, as one brother relates the triumph of his twin.

—JPB

# STAR WARS IS NOT MAD

by James Benford

He was sitting on a concrete bench at the airport as I drove up. I hadn't seen my brother in quite some time. He still looked quite the professor with his beard and tweeds, and yet somehow athletic. Professor Gregory Benford threw his bag into the back seat and began to chat about the debate.

The Physicians for Social Responsibility, they are called. They have public discussions and debates often. The last one had been about how beastly we were being to the Russians. Greg had come up from Laguna Beach for a debate they were sponsoring on the Strategic Defense Initiative—or "Star Wars," as it's actually getting to be known. Greg was going to argue in favor of pursuing a defensive alternative to our present offensive posture. On the other side was Dr. Wolfgang Panofsky, former director of the Stanford Linear Accelerator, a man who had spent many years

in the circles that gave us the system of nuclear terror we have now. He was to argue that defense was a bad idea. Since he had been partly responsible for the offensive system, this wasn't surprising. I think I can maintain some impartiality in recounting the debate, since it's a battle of ideas, not individuals.

The debate was to be on the Stanford campus, but we were going early to meet Panofsky at the cocktail party and dinner. He was a short man with a large head and the smiling, reassuring manner of the scientific bureaucrat. The two academics made quite a contrast: the short, aging, urbane, accented Panofsky and the tall, vigorous, focused, middle-aged Benford. Greg told him that as graduate students in physics we had both used his Electromagnetics textbook. Over dinner they sparred a bit, feeling each other out before the battle to come. We left for the auditorium.

The audience was the usual assortment of academia: aging graduate students, faculty members, etc. But, strangely, few undergraduates. They were all comfortable upper-middle-class intellectuals, as unused to warfare as they were to the private sector. There were a lot of middle-aged overdressed spouses with time on their hands and a passing acquaintance with the "peace" movement.

### **Panofsky's Case**

Panofsky was introduced first. He was an advisor to Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Carter, a member of the Committee on Arms Control for the National Academy of Sciences, a man with a long history of involvement in the policy of mutual assured destruction.

He began his case by showing graphs of the arms race: "The U.S. has been about six years ahead in construction in warheads and delivery systems. Fifty thousand warheads exist, more than can be rationally justified: the balance of terror, which leads to a yearning for simple solutions. The right answer is to vastly decrease the inventories of weapons. The President suggested in March '83 that an impenetrable shield be built to protect America from these missiles. If such a defense could become a reality, the world would be a better place, but as a technologist I felt the speech was counter-productive."

"In past wars if an airplane sortie lost 10% of its planes, then in 10 sorties it would be reduced to 30% of its original number; this was unacceptable. In the nuclear age, if attrition were 90% and 10% penetrated, the destruction would still be unacceptable. Therefore the standard which defense has to meet with the high concentrated explosive power of nuclear weapons is much higher than in previous wars.

"Several factors make defense much more difficult. The first is that the attacker can choose where to attack, therefore the defense has to be dense everywhere. Besides, the exchange ratio is against us: it's cheaper for offense to increase its missiles than for defense to expand. All calculations of the exchange ratio using previous technology have found that defense is much more expensive than the offense. For new technologies one never quite knows, but then new technology feeds both offense and defense.

"Moreover, nuclear weapons can be delivered by missiles, cruise missiles, and bombers, so that having a missile defense does not mean you have a perfect defense. The means used or advocated now

are directed energy weapons such as lasers and particle beams. The problem is not the lethality of these weapons: they'll kill whatever they hit. The problem is controlling them—directing many weapons in an assault involving thousands of missiles. We're also not dealing with a stationary enemy. Countermeasures will be developed and directed at the platforms from which the directed energy weapons shoot. Confusion of the sensors on the platform, shielding of the missiles in some way—all these make a tricky business." He quotes Richard Nixon on the futility of trying to protect major cities.

The audience seems to be warming to his argument. Heads nod; these ideas are going down without resistance. Panofsky goes on: "A defensive system might seem like the prelude to an offensive strike threatening the Soviets. The present stability, however tenuous it may be, is based on a balance of offensive forces. If we slowly grow defenses, the Soviets may feel that we will be tempted to strike first. Our defenses would blunt the limited response attack the Soviets could make. Therefore a partial defense is technically indistinguishable from an intent to go for a first strike. The situation is symmetric—we would be disturbed if they did it."

"Therefore the principle problem with the Strategic Defense Initiative is that if we deploy partial defenses to maintain the balance, the other side will escalate the offense and we will be left at a higher level of insecurity with more weapons.

"Since orbiting platforms, i.e., satellites, are more vulnerable than ICBM's in that they have predetermined orbits, it's likely that the exchange ratio will always be in favor of the offense because of the expense of building defensible protected sat-

ellites. Satellites can be destroyed by space mines which accompany them and explode in times of war. Sensors in the defensive system can be jammed. The booster is the most vulnerable part of the ICBM, but that can be kept within the atmosphere with a fast burn. The booster will never enter space; only the upper stages will. And of course you can simply build more missiles. Moreover, laser weapons in orbit are likely to be extremely large and require enormous expenditures to boost into orbit."

Of course, we now have no viable missile defense. What is being proposed is an accelerated research program which will yield new systems, one or two decades hence. Panofsky has no problem with maintaining a vigorous research program to look at these things. He feels we should maintain a clear view of what these systems would be like, if only in order to analyze the systems which the Soviets are vigorously developing.

What Panofsky is objecting to is the oratory which goes with the research program. "What is the purpose of a policy statement by the President which sets goals when no one knows how to reach them? This policy statement extends to the American people a false hope that they can be protected. This will deflect their political will from arms control to reduce the number of armaments we have. We can't have it both ways. We can't just say the scientists will have to find a way. This will induce an attitude that says: Let the scientists work on it and we needn't worry about arms control. The word *impossible* can never be quite justified, but the hope of doing it is so remote that it's dangerous and counterproductive."

"Emphasis on a development program will clearly lead to a confrontation of American policy

with existing treaties. Current research programs are in full compliance with the ABM treaty of 1972. Should there be any deployment from such a research program, you'll have an immediate confrontation with several of our treaties. The dangers of oratory extending any substantial hope of a remedy to our hostage situation is a dangerous illusion. The only way to reduce Mutual Assured Destruction—the hostage relation between the populations of United States and the Soviet Union—is to limit the number of nuclear weapons on each side."

Clearly the Physicians for Social Responsibility like the anti-Star Wars arguments. A scattering of applause and murmured comments stir the audience.

### **Benford's Case**

The moderator introduces Greg. He has a Ph.D. from the University of California-San Diego, and works on plasma physics at UC-Irvine. He is Phi Beta Kappa, Woodrow Wilson Scholar Fellow, and happens to write science fiction. He worked at the Lawrence Radiation Lab in Livermore on relativistic particle beams for use as weapons; he has given advice to the science advisor to the President through the Council on Space Policy.

Greg comes up, says thanks for the introduction, he'd be very impressed if he didn't know the guy. He agrees that Reagan should not have said in his speech that cities would be defended, the problem is that "Reagan writes too much of his own material. Those who worked on the background for that speech didn't think he should say it because they don't see how you can do it. But what one could



foresee was the genuine technical possibility that one could defend selected targets or types of targets. The difficulty of this subject is that it is treated as all or nothing at all. We talk about it as though we want to defend an entire quadrant of the planet or else we just give up. But that's not really the problem. The job is to prevent nuclear war. The essential question is whether or not defense helps.

"Logic suggests that defense is morally superior to offense, especially when you're talking about wholesale targeting of civilian populations. Defense contains an inherently stabilizing principle. If you believe in pure offense then you reward the first strike. There is no way out of that. With no defense, a first strike is always rewarded. We have lived with this situation for 40 years. We have new technology which transcends the methods which the ABM treaty considered. They hold out the possibility of some kinds of defense which are inherently stabilizing. That is the basic issue the President should have addressed rather than holding out the 'astrodome' option, in which he promised to wrap the whole planet and protect it against ICBM's."

He goes on to say that what is really proposed is a research program to give us answers about what a real system would be like ten years downstream. "If the voices who say it cannot be done turn out to be right, we can forget about it and go back to perpetual terror. But if it turns out that you can build *some* devices for *some* kinds of defenses, it would behoove us to know that fact and debate in forums such as this whether or not such a defense is truly useful. What we should be discussing is whether defense *can* be stabilizing."

But no defense will ever be 100% pure. For most of us, most of the time, there is no defense against the hand gun, despite that technology being

over 500 years old. The question is percentages. Defense gives an answer to a problem which the proponents of pure offense never want to bring up: The possibility of accidents, third parties, Kaddafis, Khomeinis and other terrorists. A superpower that remains defenseless is open to intervention from a third power with a few ICBM's which want to extort something from you, or has a technician with a grudge. you can't be sure that ICBM's won't proliferate and be under much less control than ours are. We should try to eliminate the possibility of one mistake killing a million people. Accidents or terrorists can certainly destabilize the bloody precarious balance which we have kept with the Soviet Union. Dr. Panofsky did not mention any of the other nuclear powers, most of whom are not nearly as reliable as we are. Of particular note is the People's Republic of China, which was our enemy 30 years ago, and may be our enemy 30 years from now. Do we truly think we can maintain a *three-party* purely offensive strategic posture?

"One thing we *can* be sure of is that a defense will confuse a counterforce attack—which is stabilizing. Counterforce is an attack directly against missiles or against the ability to command and control them. The possibility we all face is that sometime in a major world crisis, the advisors who say "It's going to happen, lets strike first!" will win out. The counterforce attack would follow.

The significance of the nuclear winter idea is that there is a ceiling on the number of warheads that can be used. Therefore, a counter attack has to be carefully planned. The Soviets could not use an unlimited number of warheads or they will produce a catastrophe. With a limited number of warheads *and* the confusion caused by defense, the

Soviets would be very reluctant to attack. This is the virtue of defense."

Clearly my brother is the better speaker. He is vigorous, not droning on as Panofsky had been. He also has the clarity that comes from conviction, and the audience senses this.

"Defense has the other side of the card that Dr. Panofsky mentioned. He says that an attacker can choose where to attack. Yes, but the defender can choose where to defend. Therefore the defender has some huge efficiencies on his side particularly for *point* defense. One prefers defense because it is stabilizing. It doesn't defend everyone on the planet, but it will reduce the risk of war.

"There is a psychological attitude in the opposition to a defensive strategy which should be pointed out. They have fallen in love with the Strangeloveian embrace of Mutual Assured Destruction. The awful power of the first bomb so shook the first generation to know it, that they have thrown themselves prostrate and given up any thought of opposing it.

"The problem with that is that there is truly no long-term safety in a posture of total vulnerability. No one can guarantee that the balance will always be stable. We have had an offensive posture for decades, and an arms race at the same time, despite all the goodwill and all the forums such as this one. Is it possible that the pure offensive posture *produces* the arms race in some measure?

"Building missiles requires your opponent to build missiles to maintain a balance, and there is a runaway—as we have seen. There can also be a runaway in defense. With a limited number of nuclear weapons, any improvement on the defense on one side can be matched by improved defense on the other side in order to maintain the balance. But we have relied on a posture which makes an

arms race naturally forthcoming. The question is, can we make a *mixed* posture, with both offensive and defensive elements, which is inherently more stable than our present totally offensive posture?

"Of course, we need to reduce the number of nuclear weapons. If we get down to only a few hundred weapons on each side, we can make a very stable balance. If you have hundreds of warheads and are still in a purely offensive posture, you are still vulnerable.

"The worst crisis we've had was the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. How many warheads were there? Only a few dozen ICBM's—the rest were bombers, which are slow-delivery vehicles. If a defense can deal with a few hundred warheads, not a few thousand, then you are below a threshold for a nuclear winter.

"Our principal obstruction to negotiations right now is verification. We cannot agree with a closed society on the principles of verification. The difference here is really quite fundamental and stems from the difference between open and closed societies. But if verification is inexact in a world with a few hundred warheads, and the other side cheats and has another 100 warheads hidden away, a defense can compensate for it. Therefore the issue of verification may be finessed. You can depend upon defensive systems to make up for any disparity produced by cheating. Therefore at the level of a few hundred warheads, which involves quite a bit of disarmament, defense has a very stabilizing role.

"We should not be talking about the details of the engagement of a specific defensive system against a specific missile; what we should be addressing is philosophy—a philosophy which will

take us out of our classic offensive posture into a better system.

"No one knows the details of such a posture. No one knows how much it will cost (an issue which is brought up a great deal). No one knows if it will work: that's what you do research for. But we can ask the question of whether or not it is truly stabilizing. I've offered some argument why it might be. What appealed to the President was a constellation of arguments centered on this question.

"We should not worry at this stage about details of whether it will work well and whether or not it will cost too much. The MX missile, which is the class of weapon one would use in a first strike, is very reliable, very accurate, and costs about a third of a billion dollars for each of the hundred we are building. That includes some of the R&D money, so let's say 200 million dollars each. We're told that we can't possibly knock a missile down for less than that price. Really? Frankly, I don't believe it. It's simply not obvious that you can't destroy a missile more cheaply than the missile can be produced. *No other* advanced weapon is that way.

"In his book *Weapons and Hope*, Freeman Dyson defines 'the Arms Controlled Future,' where we make space a peaceful sanctuary and leave mankind to deal as best it can with strategic problems on the ground. The 'Technical Follies Future' does nothing to make the problems on the ground more tractable, just pursues a defensive arms race. But there is a third possible future, a future in which nuclear weapons are legally banned from the earth and space, and in which non-nuclear technologies are used in an energetic way to make bans effective. That's the kind of thing we ought to be aiming for.

"We ought to take it as one step in time; we *musn't* look at it short-term. What we should all do is urge the Congress to spend some money on R&D for this idea to illuminate the discussion with facts five to 10 years downstream."

## Questions and Answers

After this Panofsky had an opportunity to reply. He never referred to Benford by name, but mentioned the "previous presentation." He agreed with Greg on the possibility of defending specific targets. He also thinks defense against accidental causes would be a good idea. He supports the idea of using defense when there are only a few hundred warheads remaining, but the present situation is many thousands of weapons and the advent of defense would cause escalation in the number of those weapons as the most plausible reply. He certainly doesn't agree with having a research program, but "we should not be deflected from the important task of reducing nuclear weapons by negotiation."

Benford replied that the Soviet Union has pursued, for many years, a very active defense program because it fits in with their overall military posture. This is because their announced counterforce targeting (attacking military targets, not population centers) is predicated upon defense of the homeland at all costs. Ours is predicated on mutual assured destruction of both homelands. The Soviets have built extensive civil defense implacements. They have the only working ABM system in the world, around Moscow.

"And they've pursued missile defense R&D, as well as missile tests, right up to the limit of

treaties—and perhaps a bit beyond. They're building a large phased array radar system deep in the USSR, in violation of the ABM treaty," he continued.

Surprisingly, Greg doesn't think this is such a bad thing; we should be engaged in defensive actions as well. In fact, he says, "the Department of Defense should live up to its name; properly speaking, it is now the Department of Offense or perhaps the Department of War."

"The Soviets have a long affection for defense and we should still be able to negotiate with them if we had some sort of a defensive program of our own. No one can produce strategic defense in the very near term, but what we can do is construct a partial defense of certain kinds to enhance stability of the nuclear balance. Offensive strategists don't want to talk about that. They don't want strategic stability depending upon a defensive element. This administration will be gone someday and the issue will still be here. We have to think about the long-term stability of our situation."

The floor was then thrown open for questions. The audience seemed a bit hesitant at first; they clearly had come to see Panofsky triumph over the unbeliever—and were not sure that he had!

The first question resurrected the devil theory: Defense contractors are behind it all and see the end of offensive systems coming soon, so they're switching to defensive. Greg counters by pointing out that if contractors were dominant, a thousand MX's would have been built. The cost here is not really the issue. The entire strategic program is only 1% of GNP and the price of defending the entire country would probably be less than the destruction caused by one megaton on Manhattan.

Panofsky disagrees as well, but for different rea-

sons. "Offensive weapons are not at the end of their road. In the Star Wars proposal we are not countering the other side, but imitating the other side. They've done a lot of work at great cost, but we find that an attack of our nuclear forces would not be blunted in any significant way by the system they have built to date. Just because the Soviets have it doesn't mean it's a good thing." He doesn't attribute these things to the profit motive, but rather to institutional pressure on both sides of the cold war. The defense complex in the Soviet Union has terrific power and can even influence the succession to the leadership of the country. Panofsky feels that the effort to move to a strategic defensive strategy is motivated not by greed, but by erroneous assumptions.

Here Panofsky takes a new tack. He claims that holding populations hostage to annihilation is not a strategy but a simple reality derived from the large numbers of nuclear weapons in the world. He seems to deny that Mutual Assured Destruction is in fact a policy. He claims that it is wishful thinking to think that the domination of the offense will go away by either policy decisions or a partial defense.

The next question gets to the heart of the matter. Wouldn't the offense simply construct more missiles to overcome a defense in any scenario? Greg replies that it's necessary to couple strategic defense *with arms reduction* so that the defensive and offensive are more nearly in balance.

"This is the only truly stable situation you can imagine," he says. In parallel with a developing defensive position, and with full understanding of your opponent, you have to attempt to disarm in a way that renders the defense stabilizing. "We're in a tight bind, and it's not going to be easy to get



out of it." If the offense turns out to be more expensive than the defense, it makes no sense to try to overwhelm the defense. The offense will go to other methods such as cruise missiles and bombers. But these are all much slower and therefore omit that hair-trigger aspect we have today. He's for disarmament, but doesn't believe that disarmament without defense will give us a safer world.

The next question: Why can't a defensive system in space be used in an offensive way? Greg replies that all the proposed weapons to date cannot penetrate the atmosphere, with the exception of kinetic energy weapons (projectiles). "Of course, a space-based defense can be used as an anti-satellite weapon, and some people are concerned about that." But the Soviets already have one type of anti-satellite weapon and we're soon to test another. "In five years it will be a non-issue."

Panofsky agrees technically but disagrees about anti-satellite weapons. He claims the Soviet weapon is virtually useless, but the American weapon will be a serious threat to the Russians. Neither side has an operational system yet. Near-Earth orbit satellites are quite vulnerable to the space shuttle, lasers from the ground, whatever. "Here again we have competition where one side will try to use weapons to blind the sensors of the other, attack their platforms, etc. We have another battleground, a site for warfare without any improvement in security for anybody."

Question: If the gene pool of humanity is at risk due to a nuclear war, then shouldn't that overwhelming consideration demand the total eradication of nuclear weapons? It's the basic nuclear freeze position.

Benford replies that the only truly stable system in the long term must acknowledge that nuclear

weapons will *not* cease to exist. They may be reduced in level but will not be totally eradicated. Therefore some defense will have to be found to avoid their occasional use.

Panofsky disagrees. He holds that civilization is in the greatest of risks. He is strongly critical of the "illusion" of the defense debate—that there is any solution to the problem other than the removal of the cause, which is the magnitude of the nuclear inventories. "We are not pursuing arms control with sufficient enthusiasm."

He then announces that he has no problem with defense if it's not allowed to deflect the movement towards arm control. Panofsky seems to be weakening his objection to defense; the audience doesn't seem to notice.

Another question: "If history shows us that a defense always generates the production of a countervailing offense, why then should we bother to continue this cycle?"

Benford replies that we should do it because it's in everyone's interest. "The pendulum swing from offense to defense is just beginning. The last time the defense had an advantage was in World War I and in the half-century before that. It's hard to remember now that defense had predominance, because nuclear weapons have tilted the balance so much"—following on the offensive edge gained by the tank and the airplane.

"The argument that defense leads to instability, that someone perceiving that his opponent is about to deploy a defense will launch to prevent this, applies only to superpowers which do not read the newspapers. Surely one side developing defense will induce the other side to do so. The Soviets have already put a lot of effort into theirs, and we

would only be symmetrizing the relationship if we accelerate our R&D program."

Panofsky disagrees. He has trouble with the idea that, since defense and offense have oscillated in the past, they will continue to do so. He cites the French Maginot line as an example of an impenetrable defense which was literally circumvented by the Germans in World War II. (I find this a dubious example; the Maginot line was never completed and therefore its principle never tested. The panzers did *not* penetrate it—they flanked it.) Panofsky maintains that nuclear weapons increase the energy per gram of explosive power by a factor of 100,000 and that this difference cannot be overcome. He feels that policy driving technology instead of the other way around is absurd. "Physics decrees that nuclear weapons are essentially unstoppable." The outlook is so pessimistic for a meaningful defense that to make a decision to go in that direction and deflect the effort for arms control is a grave error.

The debate was over. Both men shook hands and received greetings from members of the audience. The spectators seemed eager to reassure themselves that the smiling Panofsky was the victor, after all, but they had been clearly worried during the debate. People began to file out and I began to think about what I had seen.

## Afterward

The Physicians for Social Responsibility clearly had their own agenda, above and beyond their title. Virtually all the questions had been hostile to SDI. This group and many others had been taking the "moral high ground" for years over

nuclear war. They had succeeded in putting nuclear policy on the national agenda in the early '80s.

But then Ronald Reagan used Judo on them. He proposed to get rid of the weapons through technology, not through endless negotiations. Now the "peace" movement was on the moral low ground defending MAD, which they'd spent the last five years castigating. Their refusal to consider a non-nuclear alternative to MAD, leaving Reagan to talk about saving lives, was a reversal they had not foreseen and from which they would not easily recover. Now the Soviets were back at the bargaining table trying to stop SDI before it rendered obsolete all those missiles they'd built.

What was this group really after? If they really wanted peace, if they really wanted security, why didn't they want to consider this possibility? A puzzle. I think they just don't like technology, *certainly* not techno-solutions suggested by a conservative administration. Opposition was just a convenient way to throw monkey wrenches in the wheels of power.

The debate had been the old versus the new in a struggle whose conclusion was all but decided. Wolfgang Panofsky represented the aging generation that brought us MAD and then told us that arms control was the way out. But MAD was morally flawed and was now becoming unacceptable.

Arms control was a band-aid program for the 1970s. After 20 years of it everyone was more terrified than before it started. The Soviets used it as a cover to push the construction of ever larger missiles in ever larger numbers—all within the limits of the treaties, but in the ways the treaties had not foreseen. The Soviets used it as an arena of competition. The Americans had seen it as a way of

either standing pat on the status quo or ending that arena of conflict.

As Von Clausewitz said, war is a continuation of diplomacy by other means. Arms control is a form of diplomacy which amounts to continuation of cold war by other means. Look back over the years of treaty violations, the Soviet trampling of the code of detente, the Helsinki Accords, and a long list of other agreements. Still the men who have brought us MAD thirst after more talk and more treaties. They think that talk *per se* will bring peace.

Perhaps it is unkind to suspect them of bias because their professional stand is married to Mutual Assured Destruction, but technology is against them. The arms control process hinged on counting the other side's strategic forces from satellite reconnaissance. But now cruise missiles and mobile ICBM's are essentially uncountable. They weren't limited by the arms control process and now both sides are pushing them into deployment. With the increasing development of smart weapons in ever-smaller packages, the old arms control is a dead letter.

But what was good for arms control wasn't really good for nuclear stability. Arms control wasn't disarmament; it merely codified the balance of terror. Arms control produced the multiple-warhead missile by putting limits on the number of launchers. It fixed them in countable locations which made it easier to destroy them in the first strike. The new technologies are impossible to control this way, but are inherently more stable because they cannot be easily attacked. Having advocated MAD and then arms control, and having seen both fail, they now tell us that we should reduce these uncountable weapons in order to sleep better at night.

The new boys are telling us we can break out of this pattern. Ever-advancing technologies can make planning and execution of a first strike increasingly complicated. Time and the national style seem to be on their side. Americans have a basic faith in High-Tech—it's done so much already.

For the first time I can remember, somebody is saying: "Let's get ahead on policy and let technology follow in the directions we decide!" The usual technology creep builds a constituency which later drives policy in *its* direction. The Russians have already made their decision for defense: they've been working on it for decades. They are trying hard to get us to stop because they know that when America gets going on a technology objective it will . . . well, beat anybody! certainly any centralized society. They know that they must otherwise see the withering away of their incredible investment in ICBM's—that their arsenals will grow obsolete as defense gathers strength.

As I left the building I knew that the issue was already decided in fact. Polls show most people like the idea of SDI, the most powerful man in the world is its principal advocate, and the technology momentum is in its direction.

My brother was still there, talking to the academics, professionals, church activists, spouses of executives—a "peace" constituency that somehow finds itself proclaiming assured destruction to assured defense. When Greg was gone they would continue to talk to each other, but I didn't think many other people were listening any more.

Out in the world the wheels of change were turning. As mankind moves into space so will mankind's activities, including warfare. If we could plan how to use this new arena to make the Earth more secure we'd be fools not to try it. I remem-

bered Arthur C. Clarke's law: "When an aging scientist says that a technical thing cannot be done, he is wrong." Could Clarke's law apply even to its inventor?

Wolfgang Panofsky was well intended but he was wrong. The strategic defense initiative is the first hope we've had to awaken since the nuclear nightmare began, and we are going to try it.

# EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO: "REACTIONARY UTOPIAS"

by  
Gregory Benford

One of the implicit arguments of Star Wars is that the West is worth defending. For most of us the correctness of this point of view goes without saying. For most, but not all. Curiously, it is those who have been entrusted with the faithful transmission of Western values who are least likely to consider those values in any way superior to, say, Zoroastrianism, or Marxism. It's all relative, don't you know.

In "Reactionary Utopias" the other Dr. Benford examines some of the alternatives to our society that are popular among the people who hate the idea of self defense, and takes aim against them. Do note that nobody says that the trendy academics would enjoy *living* in such a society. No, once they had the opportunity to experience it they would be the first to raise their voices, and only the threat of retribution would silence them.

—JPB



# REACTIONARY UTOPIAS

Gregory Benford

One of the striking facets of fictional utopias is that nobody really wants to live there. Perhaps the author, or a few friends, will profess some eagerness. But seldom do utopian fictions awaken a real longing to take part.

I suspect this is because most visions of supposedly better societies have features which violate our innate sense of human progress—they don't *look* like the future. They may even resemble a warped, malignant form of the past.

Time and again, utopists envision worlds where one aspect of human character is enhanced, and much else is suppressed. Plato's Republic was the first and most easily understandable of these; he thought that artists and similar unreliable sorts should be expelled. Too disruptive, y' know.

Should we be uncomfortable with this fact? If we value western European ideals, yes.

### Five Regressive Ideas

Utopian fictions stress ideas, so we need a way to advance the background assumption while suppressing the foreground of plot and character.

Nearly all utopias have one or more characteristics which I'll call *reactionary*, in the sense that they recall the past, often in its worst aspects. Here "reactionary" means an aesthetic analogy, no more. It may apply to works which are to the "left" in the usual political spectrum. (I think this one-dimensional spectrum is so misleading that the customary use of "reactionary" means little.) "Regressive" might be an alternate term, meaning that a utopia seeks to turn back the tide of western thought.

Looking over the vast range of utopian literature, I sense five dominant reactionary characteristics:

1. *Lack of diversity*. Culture is everywhere the same, with few ethnic or other divergences.

2. *Static in time*. Like diversity, change in time would imply that either the past or the present of the utopia was less than perfect, i.e., not utopian.

3. *Nostalgic and technophobic*. Usually this takes the form of isolation in a rural environment, organization harkening back to the village or even the farm, and only the simplest technology. Many writers here reveal their fondness for medieval society. The few pieces of technology superior to today's usually exist only to speed the plot or provide metaphorical substance; they seldom spring from the society itself. (Only those utopias which include some notion of scientific advancement qualify as SF. Otherwise they are usually simple rural fantasies. This point also calls into question classifying any utopia as SF if it is drastically technophobic. Simply setting it in the future isn't enough.)

4. *Presence of an authority figure*. In real utopian

communities, frequently patriarchal, this is an actual person. Historically, nearly all utopian experiments in the west have quickly molded themselves around patriarchal figures. In literary utopias, the authority is the prophet who set up the utopia. Often the prophet is invoked in conversations as a guide to proper, right-thinking behavior.

5. *Social regulation through guilt.* Social responsibility is exalted as *the* standard of behavior. Frequently the authority figure is the focus of guilt-inducing rules. Once the authority figure dies, he or she becomes a virtual saint-like figure. Guilt is used to the extreme of controlling people's actions *in detail*, serving as the constant standard and overseer of the citizen's actions.

These five points outline a constellation of values which utopists often unconsciously assume.

Before backing up these points with specifics, consider some utopias which *don't* share all or most of them. Samuel Delany's *Triton* seems to have none of these features; indeed, it proclaims itself a "heterotopia," stressing its disagreement with the first point. Often Delany depicts societies which express his delight in the freakish. Franz Werfel's *Star of the Unborn* (1946) depicts a heavily technological future with many desirable aspects, while accepting the inevitability of war, rebellion, and unsavory aspects. Advanced technology is carefully weighed for its moral implications in Norman Spinrad's *Songs from the Stars*.

Nonreactionary, or genuinely progressive utopias, often reject regulation through guilt. This divides utopias roughly along the axis of European vs. American, with the Europeans typically favoring "social conscience"—a term that often just means guilt.

Consider Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*

(the most prominent American utopia of the 19th century) and William Morris's reply to it, *News from Nowhere*. Both stabilize society more through gratification of individual needs than through guilt. Indeed, one of the keys to American politics is just this idea. Huxley's *Island* (written after his move to California) sides more with gratification, though of course his *Brave New World* (written in England) depicts the horrific side of a state devoted to gratification without our "sentimental" humanist principles.

### LeGuin as Reactionary

Utopists often thought to be forward-looking, chic, and left-wing may be in fact reactionary. Consider, for example, Ursula LeGuin. Arguably her *The Dispossessed* is the finest American utopian novel of our time, and much of her work touches on these issues.

A first clue comes from the strangely 19th-century middle-European "feel" of her background society in *The Dispossessed*. This gives a curious static flavor, and of course recalls her reverence for the European tradition of utopian thought.

Her utopian experiment on the world Anares is strikingly technophobic. Except for minor intrusions of a faster-than-light communicator and interplanetary travel (old SF staples), there is little which suggests the future at all. The vague middle-European feel to the architecture, organization of work, etc. is clearly nostalgic; rural Europe itself isn't even like that any more. Plainly the author disapproves of the techno-flash and dazzle of the opposite world, Urras.

There, Shevek can't connect with the womanly embodiment of Urras's temptation, and he symbolically spills his seed on the ground before her.

Indeed, after this novel LeGuin saw space travel as "a bunch of crap flying around the world, just garbage in the sky."<sup>1</sup> NASA's planetary missions, or Shevek's science, can be clean, serene. Technology, though, is practical, dirty, and liable to fall into the wrong hands.

We learn that the Hainish, who began the colony worlds, are burdened and driven by some strange guilt. Considering their superiority in so many fields, it is difficult not to conclude that LeGuin feels we should regard their guilt as admirable, too. This book is the culmination of her utopian thinking, a path which leads through the short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." (This parable might be titled "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelettes," because we know what it takes to make one—you must break some eggs.)

*The Dispossessed* reeks with Old-Testament themes and images, using guilt as the principal social control. The founder, Odo, is the central saint of a communal society. Her pain and suffering during nine years' imprisonment *make possible* the virtue of the later Anarres society. Citizens remind each other of the events and connect her suffering with their dedication.

The implied lesson is that utopia will not arrive until man comes to grip with his own inner nature, which means in turn that a citizen is *born guilty*. This is central. Citizens must repay Odo's pain with their submission to the general will and society's precepts. Living on Anarres has an uncanny resemblance to being nagged by your mother.

The marriage vows in Castro's Cuba explicitly require a couple to raise all children according to "socialist morality." On Anarres a child is not a true citizen, psychically, until he has undergone a guilt-inducing experience—an unconscious, implicit

rite.<sup>2</sup> Both processes seek to induce early control. The crucial scene in the protagonist Shevek's childhood is the boy's imprisonment game, described in careful detail. (This incident is clearly central, an act of juvenile delinquency taking up more space than Shevek's entire courtship of his wife!)

Odo is clearly the guilt-inducing authority figure which appears so often in reactionary utopias, though she is not the customary type: male, dynamic, assertive. Odo dies just before her utopia begins (see the short story "The Day Before the Revolution") and has some resemblance to LeGuin herself. It is interesting, then, that Odo avoided the problems of building a real utopia, for LeGuin does this too.

### **Reading the Silences**

There is a further method of investigating utopian writings, after first applying the litmus test of the above characteristics: reading the author's silences.

Plausibly, the yearning which motivates a writer to construct a utopia, devoting narrative energy to it, will in turn lead the author to neglect certain disturbing problems. The novel then reflects the author's avoidance of crucial questions that arise naturally from the imagined world. Conscious avoidance (or, more importantly, unconscious neglect) of these tells us what the writer fears and feels uncomfortable with. We might then expect the inhabitants of a utopia also never to think of the blind areas in their own society.

The principal ignored problem of *Anarres* is the problem of evil and thus violence; to LeGuin they are often synonymous. Guilt ("social conscience") simply overcomes such discordant elements. In the middle of a drought in which people starve no matter how evenly food is shared, somehow no

one thinks of taking up arms with some friends and seizing, say, the grain reserves. Similarly, there is no on-stage evidence in *The Dispossessed* of hardened criminals, insane people, or naturally violent types (indeed, violence is "unnatural," and an impulse toward it is the principal offense which calls up guilt). There is a "prison camp" for "undesirables," evidence for the ambiguity of this utopia. But people seem to go there for offenses such as writing unpopular plays or, perhaps, voting Republican.

LeGuin's silence is conspicuous. This arouses the suspicion that the shying away from violence of any sort is part and parcel of the emotional posture of which *The Dispossessed* is only one reflection.

Tolstoy is the obvious father of many of LeGuin's ideas, techniques, and even literary mannerisms. As Samuel R. Delany has remarked in "To Read *The Dispossessed*,"<sup>3</sup> whenever LeGuin begins to discuss politics (a common occasion) or show it (quite rare), she uses a language which "... sentence by sentence is pompous, ponderous, and leaden." He surmises that her style owes much to the Victorian translations of the great European novels, and that when she attempts depth she unconsciously lapses into this voice. These are "signs of a 'European' or 'Russian' profundity that the (translated) texts do not have." (This brilliant essay stresses the micro-text and ignores the book's principal strength, its beautiful structuring. As Delany deftly shows, hidden assumptions or avoided problems often show up best at the sentence or even phrase level. He also misses some of the lovely passages which her style achieves.)

Why Tolstoy? He, as well as the Russian anarchist Prince Kropotkin, took an absolutist position—no cooperation with any state control which used force. It is worth noting that the home of much

idealist anarchist thinking, Russia, is now the largest prison state in history. One suspects that this comes in part from the inability of the 19th-century socialist thinkers there to confront the problem of violence in any moderate way.

One would then expect LeGuin's *Anarres* to evolve, if it ever slipped free of the authorial hand, in the direction of 19th-century Russia—without, of course, the apparatus of the Czar, etc. These are the roots of modern totalitarianism.

Failing to confront the problem of evil and violence gives these forces more power, not less. A quite plausible outcome, then, would see the reduction of *Anarres* to warring camps, each promising to restore order and ideological purity, perhaps even concluding with a Bolshevik-style victory.

LeGuin attempts to finesse this entire problem. It doesn't work. Her ignoring of a remarkable historical parallel (the demise of Russian socialist idealism at the hands of Lenin) marks *The Dispossessed* as a deeply reactionary work, concerned more with repealing history than with understanding it to make a better future.

This came up recently when I was discussing Soviet SF with one of the principal SF critics there. Appropriately enough, it was a cold day in 1984 and we were crossing Red Square beneath a leaden sky threatening snow. He remarked that *The Dispossessed* was not translated into Russian, in part because it referred to ideas the regime didn't like. Then he said rather wistfully, "For us, you know, it is terribly nostalgic. And irrelevant. That's the way some thought it could be, back in the beginning."

LeGuin seems to have tentatively approached the problem of real-world violence in the cartoon version of real politics depicted in *The Eye of the*



*Heron*. There, descendants of the Mafia confront nonviolent anarchists in highly implausible fashion, leading to retreat of the anarchists into the wilderness—a note oddly reminiscent of many American escape-adventures. One must conclude that LeGuin can hardly bear to confront this crucial issue, and when she does sees no solution.

But there seems to me a deeper reason for LeGuin's silence about the realities of the world: fundamentally, the real world does not matter.

As the British critic Roz Kaveny has remarked in a review of *Malafrena*, "Throughout there is the sense that fills all of LeGuin's work: that politics is important less for what it can do for other people than as a way of achieving personal moral self-realization. Altruism is seen as good for its own sake and not because it may be useful to the underprivileged, although the altruist is supposed to be too busy to ever think in precisely those terms."

A utopia of hard-scrabbling scarcity solves so many problems quite cheaply. No worries of distribution of wealth, no leverage for power relationships. And it casts all in a superior light: poor people can have few sins. Throughout, no one questions a system which produces poverty, because, after all, it provides lovely opportunities for sacrifice.

A genuine revolutionary in such a place would be he who puts productivity over political theory. No such figure appears—another author's silence. But reality, after all, is not the principal concern of such narratives.

So the crucial scene in *The Eye of the Heron*, in which anarchist confronts Mafia thug and the protagonist dies, is *skipped*. We learn of it obliquely, via dialogue, in flashback. Partly this comes no doubt from her aversion for violence, but I suspect we are meant to see the moral grandeur of the

survivors as the central fact. Even death is another way to strike a moral posture—or rather, to *be seen* doing so.

Similarly, the street confrontations on Urras in *The Dispossessed* rang false to many reviewers, and for good reason: they are the only example of real-world political confrontation in the book, and LeGuin knows very little of such things.

So her anarchists, confronting theory rather than facts, come over as nice, reasonable, and fairly boring. They behave like middle-class middle-brows, except that they are scrupulously horrified at the idea of property. (One of the book's assets lies in reassuring the middle-brow reader that revolutions will let him feel moral and yet comfortable. Everyone, after all, believes himself capable of overcoming his own greed and being a nice guy.) The conspicuous villains of the book are a physicist who steals Shevek's work, and of course lots of pseudo-American capitalists on Urras.

But not quite. As Delany pointed out in his essay, she treats the homosexual Bedap with an unconscious condescension. It is clear that Bedap should reform himself—stop being gay—because it does not fit in with the utopia she is constructing in her head. Which in turn intersects with the reactionary utopist's dislike of cultural diversity. Homosexuals cannot be eliminated from human society (without genetic engineering at least); they are a fact impossible to ignore, but clearly their presence troubles LeGuin's blueprints.

In her world, a quiet talk over herbal tea will surely fix matters up. A romantic, she ignores the problem of evil. In LeGuin's land, crowds watching a potential suicide on a window ledge never shout "Jump!" Averting her gaze from the 20th century, she sees evil people as those unfortunates

who have not been given sufficient chance to be good.

The real question here is not the use of violence—which is, in LeGuin's work, an invariable sign of Wrongness—but rather, is moral order compatible with human diversity? Her answer is clear: her societies should opt for the age-old solution known to the Pharoahs—moral authoritarianism. Even in the dystopian future America of her novelette, "The New Atlantis," dissidents retreat into classical music and romantic humanism as a counter to the oppressive state. Old world values can, perhaps, redeem us.

Active thwarting of violence is not allowed, though. LeGuin labels her utopia as ambiguous, clearly knows something is wrong, but does not confront the deep problems. Rather than think through the hidden assumptions of Anarres, Shevek returns to pursue his own moral self-realization. Perhaps he, too, will become a martyr, like Odo—and thus engender more guilt, more attendant control.

### Looking Backward

But *why* are utopists so often reactionary? Obviously, some underlying aspects of LeGuin's thought come from the failures of European utopian theory. But there's more to it than that.

While there is much in reactionary utopias we should scorn, I think we should properly look at *The Dispossessed* and some more obviously feminist utopias as responses to earlier, more mechanistic and masculine utopias. (As examples of novels which clearly are such reactions, see Suzy McKee Charnas's *Motherlines*, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*.) They depict communal societies with pleas-

ant characteristics: relative lack of government, ecologically virtuous, with diffusion of parenting, freedom of movement, sexual freedom, and no crime.

Women's utopias often use the family as a model for social structure, but it's "the unowned, non-patriarchal family, headed by nobody."<sup>4</sup> This, with their classlessness, makes them seem like fantasies about how families ought to be (and seldom are).

If masculine utopias fret over the means of production, feminist ones are bothered by the means of reproduction. They uncouple sex from power. But this is not enough to provide social ordering.

Perhaps it is natural for women to extend the family as a model, since they have not so often experienced society as a focus of conflicting forces. When dreaming of the future, we all tend to take the most pleasant areas of our lives and puff them up into metaphors for better societies.

It isn't surprising, then, that the problem of control doesn't rear its vexing head in such utopias, and the principal problem seems to be work assignments (who's going to do the dishes?). I recall Lenin's famous remark as he took over the government, little anticipating how hard it would be. He said, "A baker can run the state," and proceeded with a lot of half-baked approaches. In the end, Stalin came along to crack heads and force-march Russia into the future.

In most feminist utopias, no trace remains of general competitiveness and the desire to be better than others. Somehow, they have been laundered from the human psyche. (Interestingly, few support this by asserting that women are inherently better—that is, uncompetitive. The idea seems to be that men have merely taken a wrong turn lately.)

There is no doubt which authority figure is to set the house rules, as Joanna Russ's choice of words signifies: "Careful inspection of the manless societies usually reveals the intention (or wish) to allow men in . . . if only they can be trusted to behave."<sup>5</sup> If you don't, presumably you are sent to your room, i.e., exiled—unless it's James Tiptree's (Raccoona Sheldon's) utopia in "Houston, Houston, Do you Read?", where you'll be killed with minimal regrets. In no case should divisive ideas or surging hormones be allowed to thwart the communal good. Unsurprisingly, the authority figure is the only fallback enforcer in such worlds. The problem of control is simply neglected.

These feminist utopias are primarily reactive, responding to perceived masculine evils. The qualities they long for—stronger communal feeling, harmony with the natural world, violence only if it expresses anger in limited ways or in self-defense, good country vs. bad city (where the streets are unsafe)—reflect current needs. But by concentrating on these concerns they run the risk of forsaking the gains of the present, and becoming reactionary because they cannot imagine *new* ways to organize a community.

Freedom to do as we please, so long as we all agree with each other and remain in a state of harmony with the cosmos, is no freedom at all. It is little better than a religion in which faith in a deity has been replaced by faith in some supposed truths of the human spirit. It is a single-party system that is as superficially benign, yet as subtly authoritarian, as Disneyland.

Why does much utopian thought tend in this direction? The central difficulty confronting social planners is just that contained in the name—they must *plan*, and so must fear the wild card, the

diverse, the self-regulating. History provides methods for governing errant wild spirits, so a planner looks longingly backward for models. Few peer ahead to landscapes where men and women have more freedom, can interact swiftly and chaotically yet with good result.

Some SF authors have seen this. Norman Spinrad's depictions of electronic democracy, from *Bug Jack Barron* onward, are deliberately saturated with lust for power and sharp contradictions. Frederik Pohl has meditated throughout a long career on these problems, notably in the recent *The Years of the City*, which abounds in utopian visions threaded with practical lore.

And what about looking at such older (more apparently "right-wing") utopian novels such as Heinlein's *Beyond This Horizon* and Niven and Pournelle's *Oath of Fealty*? I suspect they'll prove to be rather more enlightened than some recent chic visions.

It seems to me that reactionary facets spring in part from lack of imagination. Feminists, searching for ways to revise our society, fall upon analogies with the family, even if these do not provide solutions to the genuine problems of a diverse, urban, cantankerous world.

Instead, utopists long for sweeping simplicities. The supremacy of communal values, the need to suppress the individual, the fear of diversity or of science, the longing for a respite from change—these find many echoes in socialist thinking, in Third World societies, in all those who look hopefully forward to a restful era when we could, thank God, sleep off the binge known as modern times.

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# EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO: "THE PRINCE"

by  
C.J. Cherryh

"The Prince" is an excerpt from *Heroes in Hell*, Volume I of a braided meganovel to be published in March 1986 by Baen Books.\* Odd fare, you might say, for a magazine that prides itself on steel-hard, chromium-edged realism. Perhaps, but we also publish rigorously logical fantasy—and besides, it says right here in the rule-book that a science fiction story is permitted one major assumption. But be it science fiction or fantasy, given the sins of this world, is a Hell that concentrates on politicians and Men on Horseback such a far-out notion?

—JPB

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\*Created by our own Janet Marris with the diabolical assistance of Gregory Benford, C.J. Cherryh, David Drake, more. Starring Ceasar and Cleopatra; Alexander of Macedon and Judah Macabee; Uri Andropov, Che Guevara, and the Devil himself, *Heroes in Hell* is the beginning of the greatest braided meganovel of all time: *Aroint thee, Thieves' World!*



# THE PRINCE

C.J. Cherryh

The foundations shook. The lights went out. The computer went down.

*"Dannazione—!"*

Lights went up again. The monitor came up on a blank screen and the disk drive hummed away, hunting idiotically for vanished instructions.

Dante Alighieri was already on his way down the hall, down the stairs, through the grand hall and into the First Citizen's glassed-in garden-portico. *"I scellerati! I maledetti—!"*

*"Si vis, si vis Graece modum, Dantille."* Augustus waggled fingers, waved a hand, and anxious sycophants shied aside as he swung his feet over the side of the couch. *"Noli tant' versari—"*

*"Gone!"* Dante waved a fistful of papers. *"Gone!"* The steam seemed to go out of him. He drew one breath and another and gasped after a third. *"I had it. I had it—"*



"Indubitably," Niccolo drawled from a chair to the side.

Dante's dark eyes went wide. White showed around his nostrils and along the line of his lips. Then the eyes suffused with tears and the lips parted in a sob after breath. "If I could remember—if I could only remember—but that machine, but this place, but those lunatics, *ma questi*—"

"I know, I know, my dear boy." Augustus put out his hand and patted the poet's hand, which was clenched white-knuckled on his knee opposite him. "You have to be patient, you know. You have to expect these things."

"It is," said Niccolo, extending his feet before him, ankles crossed, "the nature of this place."

Dante bowed his head into his hands. "The damned lights fail, this insane power that comes and goes—" He looked up again, at Augustus's face, at the half-dozen sycophants. At Niccolo and Kleopatra and the visitor-youth who stared wide-eyed at the mad poet. "I was so close. They *know*, don't you think they know? And the lines are gone, *two hundred lines*—"

"You'll remember them again. I'm sure you will."

"If it made any difference," said Niccolo.

"Damn you!" The poet leapt up and for a moment violence trembled in his hands, his whole body. Then his countenance collapsed, the tears fell, and Dante Alighieri turned and ran from the room.

"Do you know," Niccolo said to no one in particular, "I did once admire the man."

"Shut up, Niccolo," Augustus said.

Niccolo Machiavelli stretched his feet the further and made a little wave of his hand. "*Dimittermi*."

"Sorry won't mend it. Dammit, Niccolo, do you have to bait him?"

"The man's dangerous. I tell you, *Auguste*, you ought to have him out of the house. Visit him on Louis. Two madmen ought to get on well together. They can commiserate. Bestow him on Moctezuma. They can plot strategies together."

"Be still, I say!"

A second flourish of the hand. "You always had a fondness for the arts. It served you well. This man will not."

"Niccolo—"

A third lift of the hand, this time in surrender. "*Signore*."

"Out!" That was for the sycophants, the collection that hovered and darted like gnats throughout the Villa. Petty functionaries and bureaucrats in life, they haunted the place and came and went in perpetual facelessness, trying for points. One scurried up with papers, a pen.

"If the Imperator would—"

"Out!"

The sycophant fled. The newly-arrived youth, who had come wandering into the downstairs hall with some sort of petition, gathered himself to his feet and tried for the door.

"You," Augustus said, and transfixed the fugitive in midstep. "*What's your name?*"

"B-b-b-brutus, if it please you, sir."

"*Di immortales*. Which?"

"W-w-w-which?"

"Lucius, Decimus, or the Assassin?"

"A-a-a-assass-in?"

"S-s-s-sounds like the First Lucius," Niccolo said.

"Shut up, dammit, Niccolo. *Which are you, boy? Uterque?*"

"M-marcus. Marcus Junius Brutus."

"Ye gods." Kleopatra got off her couch, on the other side. Niccolo sat stiff with his hand quite

surreptitiously on the dagger at the back of his belt. And the Akkadian got up with his hand on his sword.

"What's wrong?" young Brutus asked, all wide-eyed. "What's the matter?"

"You just got here, did you?"

"I—don't know." Wide eyes blinked. "I—just g-g-got this notice—" Brutus reached into his robe and Sargon's sword grated in its sheath. Brutus stopped cold, a terrified look on his face. "Did I do something?"

"Never mind the paper," Augustus said. "I've seen them. Official directive. An assignment of zone. Where have you been all this time, boy? Downstairs?"

"I—don't know. I—I think I'm d-d-d-dead—"

"How?"

"I don't know!"

"The Administration has a sense of humor."

"*Quid dicis?*"

"Never mind." The house shook. The lights blinked again. Augustus raised his eyes ceilingward as the lights swayed. A wild sob drifted down the corridors—*Damn!*—from far up the hall.

"Viet Cong," Niccolo explained. Young Brutus looked pathetically confused. "The Park. *Viet Cong*. They make overshots. Plays merry hob with the power lines. You don't know about that either."

A slow shake of the head. A steady gaze of quiet, helpless eyes.

"Sometimes," Niccolo said, "you really know it's Hell."

"The man who lost something," Brutus said over lunch in the garden-court. "What did he lose?"

Niccolo blinked, looked at the boy across the wire and glass table—Kleopatra had joined them, demure and dainty in a 1930s cloche and black

veil. And Hatshepsut. It was an unlikely association, the Greek with the Egyptian, the Egyptian in a lavender 2090s bodysuit and with a most distressing armament about her person. But they were all a little anxious lately. Niccolo kept to his dagger and a tiny 25th-century disruptor, when armament seemed necessary.

"Dantillus," Brutus said.

"Dante. Dante Alighieri. Born long after your time." Niccolo sipped his wine, waved off a hovering sycophant who proffered more. The sycophant persisted, sycophant-like. Niccolo turned a withering look on the fool, which ebbed away. "Never trust them," he muttered. "Always ask for the whole bottle."

"Check the cork," said Kleopatra, and Brutus's wide eyes looked astonished.

"But what did he lose?"

"Oh," said Hatshepsut, "*ka* and *ba*, I think."

"*He psuche*," said Kleopatra. "*Kai to pneuma*."

"*Animus et anima*," Niccolo said with a twist of his mouth, and smiled. "His soul. At least that's what he calls it. —*Dammit*, man!" He rescued his glass from a sycophant who oozed up to the table so subtly it almost succeeded in pouring.

"More wine," said Hatshepsut. "The whole bottle."

The sycophant was gone on the breath.

"You see," said Niccolo, "Dante Alighieri was very devout. He's sure it was a mistake that sent him here." He laughed, with a second bitter twist of his mouth. "Isn't it always? That rascal Cesare Borgia made it upstairs—his father was a pope. And here I sit, because *I* wrote a book."

"You think that's why," said Kleopatra, sipping wine. Her eyes were enormous through the veil. A diamond glittered on her cheek, beside a perfect

nose. "I daresay that's what drives poor Dante mad—*thinking*, you understand. He was quite unreasonable from the beginning—began writing out all his works by hand, absolutely certain that he had offended—*ummm*—the Celestial—by some passage of his work. And he went to the computer to speed his reconstruction. Now *that's* become an obsession. Dante and that machine, hour after hour. Checking and checking. Redoing all his work. He gets terribly confused. Then the computer goes down. Poof! One has to feel sorry for him."

"I don't," said Hatshepsut. She leaned elbows on the table. "The man was a fool. *La divina* Beatrice. To put divinity on a lover—*that's* a mistake! I had a lover try to *take* it once; chiseled his way into my monuments—Sssst. Let me tell you, I was a god. So was my friend here—well, god-*dess*; times change. Augustus was, of course, but the silly Romans only did it after they were dead. *I* was a real god, beard, atef, crook, and flail, the whole thing; I held my power and I died old. Now I know why I'm here. Politics. Niccolo's here on politics. So's Augustus. And if Dante's here, it's *still* politics. Nothing else."

"Dante's become quite a nervous man," said Niccolo. "He's certain he's wronged someone important." He shrugged. "On the other hand—perhaps he *doesn't* belong here. I'd truly watch what I told him."

"You think *I* belong here?" Brutus asked in dismay.

"But you have a paper," Niccolo said softly. "It says you do. Just don't trust Dante. The man was brilliant. Never mistake that. But he's not able to accept this. Some never seem to. Not to accept where one is—that's quite mad."

The sycophant arrived with the wine, another

with glasses. Niccolo turned and took them, slapped an intrusive hand.

"—As for instance, I survived where others did not. I survive here. I keep company with gods. And a surfeit of sycophantic fools." He waved off a corkscrew and supplied his own from his wallet. "You never know. Poor C-cl-claudius was deified with a dish of mushrooms. Cesare Borgia had a certain touch." He inserted the prongs and pulled the cork. "Most anything can be deadly. Poison on the glass rim. On one side of a knife both parties share. One has to trust someone sometime." He poured a glass and handed it toward the youth. "As for instance, now."

"He *what*?" Julius Caesar swung down out of his jeep in the driveway, swept off his camouflage helmet, and dusted a hand on his fatigues. "I don't believe it."

"Nevertheless," said Sargon. The Akkadian leaned on the fender while the khaki-clad driver got out and stood staring. "Marcus Junius Brutus."

"There were seven hundred years of Marcus Junius Brutuses."

"The last. Augustus said to tell you." Sargon set his jaw and his ringleted beard and hair shadowed his sloe-eyed face in angular extremes. "He's seventeen."

Julius looked at his driver. Decius Mus gnawed at his lip, took the rifles out and slung them over his shoulder as if he had heard nothing at all. "Dammit, Mouse!"

"He doesn't remember," Sargon said. "I told you: he's seventeen."

"Oh, *hell*."

"Yeah," Sargon said.



Octavianus Augustus paced to the window and gazed outward where the Hall of Injustice towered up into Hell's forever-burning clouds. He looked back at Julius, who sat in a spindly chair, booted feet crossed. Mud was on the boots, flecks of mud spattered on Julius's patrician face. Julius always brought a bit of reality with him; and when he was under the roof Augustus felt like Octavianus again; felt like plain Octavius, jug-eared adolescent scholar.

Get out of Rome, Julius had advised his widowed niece Atia once upon a time, a dangerous time of civil unrest; and sent her whole family to obscurity in Greece. But there had been letters from Julius. There had been the long understanding: careful tutelage of her son Octavius, the pretenses, the cultivation of this and that faction—not least of them the army. To meet with Julius under these circumstances, in the quiet of his private apartments—it brought back the old days; brought back secrecy; and hiding; and as always when uncle Julius talked business, Augustus Pater Patriae, First Citizen, felt his ears a bit too large, his shoulders a bit thin, felt his own intellect no match for the raw scheming charisma that was Julius.

Augustus was a god, posthumously. Julius sneered at gods and worshipped luck. His own. Julius deliberately created his own legends. Even in Hell. And Augustus felt helplessly antiquated, in his light robes, his Romanesque villa, before this man who took to modernity like a fish to water.

Julius spurned the *most* modern weapons. Not to be thought ambitious. Of course.

"It's us they're aiming at," Augustus said finally. "This little gift comes from high Authority. The refinement, the subtlety of it: that argues for—" Augustus' eyes shifted toward the skyscraper that

towered at the end of Decentral Park. And meant His Infernal Highness. The Exec.

"Well, whoever set this little joke up has certainly bided his time," Julius said. "If it was planned this way from the start, that lets Hadrian out as originator—Brutus was in storage a damn long while before *he* got here. Has to be someone who predated us."

"I've wondered—" Augustus' voice sank away. He came back and sat down, hands clasped between his knees, in a chair opposite his great-uncle. A boy again. "How high up—and how far back—do the Dissidents go?"

"Making the boy a catspaw for that lot?" Julius rubbed the back of his head where a little baldness was; it was a defensive habit, a nervous habit, quietly pursued. "Damn, I'd like to know how long he was held in reserve and where he's been."

"No way to find that out without getting into Records."

"And deal with the fiends. No. That's vulnerability. Open ourselves up to his royal asininity—"

Hadrian, Julius meant. Supreme Commander. Lately kidnapped by the Dissidents. So much for High Command efficacy. Augustus flinched at the epithet. "He's in favor—"

"Asses are always in fashion. They make other asses feel so safe."

"*Absit mi!* For the gods' own sake, Gaius—"

"Isn't it the way of empires? You set one up, then you have to let the damn bureaucrats have it. Only thing that saved Rome, all those secretaries, with all those papers—no one after us ever did run the government. Couldn't find the damn right papers without the secretaries. The thing got too big to attack. Even from the inside. It just tottered on over the corpse of every ass who thought he could

shift it left or right. Same thing going on down at the Pentagon right now. The Dissidents work for the government. They don't know it; but they do. Whole thing runs like a machine." Julius ticked his hand back and forth. "Pendulum. It gets the great fools and the efficient with alternate strokes. Now here's Hadrian gone missing—you think the government's really going to miss Hadrian? Not before snowfall. You think it cares, except for the encouragement it affords fools? His *secretaries* know where all the damn papers are. The Exec'll put some other ass in if they lose him. If they get him back they'll let him serve a while before they advise him to retire. He's lost prestige, hasn't he? But appoint me in his place? Not a chance in Hell. They'll pick some damn book-following fool like Rameses."

"You think all of this is interconnected."

"You miss my point. *Chaos* is the hierarchy's medium. They don't plan a damn thing. Half the chaos comes from the merest chance some insider with a capital S has a coherent plan. The rest of it comes of every damn nut outside the system who thinks he's just figured it out. The waves of the bureaucracy will roll over it all eventually. But you have to think of that chance: that very briefly, someone in a position wants to neutralize us. Beware the bureaucrats. Beware the secretaries."

"*Pro di*. You escaped them."

"Oh, no, no, no, *Augustulle*. What do you think, that geniuses masterminded my demise? It was the bureaucrats. The fools. And who survived it all? *You* killed the conspirators and inherited all the secretaries. And where are those same secretaries?" Julius waved a hand toward the wall, the window, the skyscraper. "Still at it. All those damn little offices. You wonder why I stay out in the

field? The army's the only bureaucracy you can sit on. I *really* don't want to find his imperial asininity. I'd *like* the damn Dissidents to send Hadrian's head in. That'd take him out of circulation a while. I'm terribly afraid they won't. But someone in those offices is either afraid I'll take out the Dissidents—or thinks I might use this operation to gather troops for myself—"

"Of course you're not doing that."

"Frankly I'm not. I always preferred Gaul. It was much safer than Rome. *Wasn't* it?"

"You never were a politician."

"Never."

"Niccolo says kill him."

"Pah. Kill him! What would that stop? I tell you: what they've done in sending this boy is damned effective. I'd rather face a regiment."

"Than kill him? *Pro di*, when the State's at risk, one life—*any* life—"

"Now that's Niccolo talking. No. I'll tell you another thing. I have a soft spot." Julius picked up his helmet. Looked at it and fingered a dent ruefully as if it held an answer. "Maybe it's my head, what do you think?"

"I think he's a problem you want to ignore." Augustus got to his own feet with a profound sigh. "I'll tell you where the soft spot is. It's age that gets to you. It's battering down the fools time after time and finding they're endless. It's getting tired of treachery. There's a point past which Niccolo's advice has no meaning. There's this terrible lassitude—"

Julius looked up at him, a stare from deep in those black eyes, and Augustus/Octavius flinched. "Do you think they know that—the secretaries?"

"Like rats know blood when they draw it. They're playing a joke."

"Does it occur to you that they're playing it on him as well—on Brutus? Maybe he's offended someone."

"Dante."

"Offended *Dante*?"

"No. *Offended someone*. That's how they manage us, you know. There's always that nagging worry. Who it could offend. Who might know. How far the ripples might go. Dante's obsessed with it. It's a disease. It's the chief malady in Hell. I have it. You have it. We're all vulnerable. *Pro di*, win the damned war!"

Julius smiled that quirkish smile of his. "I do. By continuing to fight it."

"Damn, as soon argue with Mouse!"

"No one argues with Mouse. He doesn't want anything. He knows this is Hell. You and I keep forgetting it, that's our trouble. They make it too comfortable for us long-dead. And then they do something—"

"Like this."

"They find something you want. It doesn't take a great mind to do that. A fool can do it. What they can't see is where it leads. And how it leads back to them. Mouse teaches me patience, *Augustulle*. A man who *chose* this place of his own volition has nothing they can hold him by. I have no intention of winning my war. Or of killing this boy. Now I know about him what I should have known all those years ago."

"That he's your son?"

"That, I knew. No. *Now* I know how to hold him."

"Like Antonius. Like Antonius, brooding over there with Tiberius and his damned—"

Julius quirked an eyebrow. "You were my trouble with Antonius, *Augustulle*. You still are. Anto-

ninus refuses to come where you are. And my only Roman son knew I couldn't acknowledge him. For my reputation's sake. For that bitch Rome. I'll tell you another secret. I never expected to live as long as I did. It's the women; the Julian women. Gods, if we could persuade my aunt in here. Old Aunt Julia pushed and shoved Marius; did the same to me; and trained my sister, who taught your mother, who trained you. Brutus didn't have a Julia, that was what. Just the little society-minded fool I got him on. I turned him away. And lo, in fate's obscure humor, he turns out to be the only *Roman* son I ever sired. I always thought I had time. You, off in Greece—you were insurance."

"You'd have killed me if you and Calpurnia—"

"*Pro di*, no. What was Alexander's will? *To the strongest?* I knew which that was. You don't hold a grudge, do you? *Don't* create me another Antonius, nephew. Brutus, I can handle."

Augustus opened his mouth, trying to find something to say to that. But Julius turned and left, closing the door gently behind him.

The floor shook to a distant explosion. The lights dimmed and brightened again.

Julius never paused in his course down the hall. The troops had the Cong baffled. The Cong made periodic tries on the villa. It was perpetual stalemate.

It was a *raison d'être*. And a power base.

He snapped his fingers and a half a dozen sycophants heard the sound and converged beside him as he walked along. No sycophant ever resisted such a summons.

"I want," he said, "the young visitor. In the library."

He walked on. There were other orders to pass. Some of them were for Mouse.

\* \* \*

"He's out of his mind," said Sargon.

"His son," Kleopatra said, drifting on her back. The pool was Olympic-sized, blue-tiled. Kleopatra righted herself and trod water while Sargon sat on the rim and dangled his feet in. "Son, son, son. Dammit." She swam off, toward the other end, neat quick strokes, and Niccolo, standing chest deep, wiped his hair back and gazed after her.

"Ummnn," Niccolo said, while Kleopatra seized the baroque steel ladder and climbed out in her black and white striped 1980s swimsuit and very little of it. "Doesn't *look* like a mother, does she?"

"Caesarion."

"Very touchy. *Very touchy.*" Niccolo waited till the diminutive figure had walked away toward the dressing rooms, lips pursed. Then: "Half a dozen children and estranged from all of them."

"This damned boy is setting the house on its ear."

"He'll do more than that. It's a master stroke. Marcus Junius Brutus. Julius's natural son. Augustus had more than one reason to kill him, didn't he? Brutus couldn't have *claimed* his paternity and built on Julius's foundations without acknowledging himself a parricide. But Augustus could take no chances. Brutus murders Julius; Augustus takes out Brutus—Kleopatra's brats all side with their dear papa Antonius, completely his. Even Julius's other son, the noble Caesarion. Dear, *ambitious* Caesarion: Augustus killed both of Julius's natural sons, you know. So in Hell Julius sides with his heir Augustus; Kleopatra sides with Julius, completely ignoring Augustus's little peccadillo in murdering one of her children—Isn't love marvelous? While Marcus Antonius sulks in Tiberius's merry little retinue, drinking himself stuporous. *There's*

the man who wanted most to be Julius's heir. There's the man who handed Julius his soul to keep; and Julius just used it and tossed it. Do you know the worst irony? Antonius still loves him. He loves Kleopatra. And those kids. And his sister and *her* little crew of murderers and lunatics. Antonius loves everyone but Augustus, who destroyed him. And lo! Brutus—who always was the greatest threat—Antonius understood. This just might bring the poor fellow back."

"Neutralize Caesar."

"Someone in the Exec's service planned this one. Someone *Roman*. Someone who understands enough to know where the threads of this run."

"Tiberius?"

"Tiberius was never subtle. Try Tigellinus. Try Livia. Try Hadrian himself."

"Before he was kidnapped?"

"If he was kidnapped. What if *he* ran the Dissidents?"

"You dream!"

"I put nothing beyond possibility. I'm surprised by nothing."

"*Brutus* certainly surprised you."

"Only in his youth. He would arrive someday. That he hadn't only meant that he would. It was irresistible to someone."

"Maybe he just served out his time in the Pit, eh?"

Niccolo leaned his arms back on the rim of the pool. His eyes half-lidded. "The Pit is a myth. I doubt its literal existence."

"Then where do they go? Where *are* the ones we miss?"

"In torment, of course. Wondering when *we're* going to show up. And when it palls, when at long last it palls and we all stop worrying—" Niccolo



made a small move of a scarred hand. "*Eccolo*. Here they are."

Sargon's hands tensed on the pool rim. He slid into the water and glared.

"There are people we *all* worry about finding," Niccolo said. "Look what they've done to Brutus. *Innocence. Ignorance*. Whips and chains are a laugh, majesty. It's our *mistakes* that get us. The Pit is here. We're in it."

"You have a filthy imagination!"

"Intelligence is my curse. I am a Cassandra. That is *my* hell, majesty. No one listens *all* the time. Always at the worst moment they fail to heed my advice." Niccolo rolled his eyes about the luxurious ceiling, the goldwork, the sybaritic splendor. "I will not even solicit you. I *know*, you see, that if I gain you, you will fail *me*, majesty, lion of Akkad. That is the worm that gnaws me."

"Insolence ill becomes you. *You* are the worm that gnaws this house. Sometimes I suspect *you*!"

Niccolo's dark brows lifted. "*Me*. You flatter my capabilities. I have no power."

"Remember you're in Hell, little Niccolo. Remember that everything you do is bound to fail. *That* is the worm that gnaws you. Power will always elude you."

"I adopt Julius's philosophy. Cooperate in everything. And *do* what I choose. Which is little. Fools are their own punishment and they are ours."

"Fools are in *charge* down here!"

"That's why they suffer least. Are you content, Lion? Does nothing gnaw at *you*? No. Of course not. You're like poor Saint Mouse. The one virtuous man in Hell. The one incorruptible soul. He has no hope. But you do. Why else do you live in this house? You were no client king. You ruled the known world."

"Flatterer. I also adopt Julius's philosophy. And you will not stir me, little vulture. No more than you stir *him*." Sargon leaned into the water and swam lazily on his back. "I am immune." His voice echoed off the high ceiling and off the water. "Better a foreign roof than Assurbanipal's court. If you want intrigue, little vulture, try your hand there. My own ten wives are *all* there. Not to mention the heirs. Why do you think I'm *here*? Not mentioning all the other kings, and all the other queens and concubines. Don't teach *me* intrigue, little vulture. Take notes."

He reached the ladder. He climbed up to the side, water streaming from dark curling hair and beard and chest. And Niccolo smiled lazily, not from the eyes.

"I am writing a new book," Niccolo said. "Dante inspires me. I am writing it on the administration of Hell."

"Who will read it, little vulture?"

"Oh. There will be interest. In many quarters."

Sargon scratched his belly and wiped his hand there. "Damn, little vulture. They'll have you in thumbscrews if you go poking around Administration."

"For instance, do you know that Julius exchanges letters with Antonius?"

Sargon stopped all motion.

"Mouse takes them." Niccolo turned and heaved himself up onto the rim of the pool, turned on his hands and sat, one knee up and hands locked about it. "I wonder what he's going to write today. He will write. Mark me that he will." He smiled, not with the eyes. "He'll have to tell Antonius that Brutus has come, you know. Antonius would never forgive him if he didn't. And never's such a damned long time down here."

"Damn your impertinence to the Pit. I had a wife like you. I strangled her. With my own hands."

Niccolo spread wide his arms. "I could never equal your strength, Lion. I should never hope to try."

Sargon glared a moment. Then he seized up a towel and wiped his hair and beard with it. Hung it about his neck with both hands, and there was a glint in his almond eyes. "Come along, little vulture. I have uses for you. How many others do? Hatshepsut? Augustus?—Hadrian?"

"How should I betray a confidence? Lion, do you attempt to corrupt me?"

"Impossible."

The lights flickered. A screen went dark, and Dante leaped from his chair. "Ha!" he cried, "*ha!* I got you, you thrice-damned sneak!" With a note of hysteria crackling in his voice and a maniacal stare, man at cyclopic machine. "Thought you got me! I had it saved! *Saved*, do you hear me?" He jerked the recorded disc from the drive and waved it in front of the monitor. "*Right here!*"

"Do you really think they hear you?"

He dropped the disc and spun about, hair stringing into his eyes. He wiped it back, blinked at something that did not, for a change, glow monitor-green, and straightened a spine grown cramped with myopic peering at miniscule rippling letters. That something which did not glow was a man in 20th century battledress. Was the owner of a pair of combat boots that flaked mud onto his Persian carpet, of a large black gun at his hip, a brass cartridge belt, brass on his shirt, a black head of hair and a face that belonged on coinage.

"Caesar."

"Marvelous machines." The Emperor-deified

walked over to the computer which had come up with READY, and picked up the disc.

"Don't—d-don't." Dante Alighieri perspired visibly. Knotted his large, fine hands.

"Oh?" Julius tapped a few keys. DRIVE? the monitor asked. "Wondrous," Julius said. "Do you know, I need one of these." He looked the disc over, one side and the other. Slipped it into the drive. Called up MENU.

"Please—"

"I did quite a bit of writing myself, you know. I still keep notes and memoirs. Old habits. You're sweating, man. You really oughtn't to work so hard."

"Please." Dante flipped the drive drawer, ejected the disc into his hands. "Please. I'd hate to lose it."

"The great epic? Or your little list of numbers?"

"I—" Dante's mouth opened and shut.

"Never trust the sycophants. I'll give you a number, scribbler. I want you to run with it. I understand you're quite talented."

"*Io non mai*—"

"Of course you do." Julius reached out and gathered a handful of the poet's shirt. "*Pro di*, you do it all the time, *mastigia*. With our equipment, on our lines, with our reputation. Let's play a little game. You like numbers? Let me give you the one for the War Department."

"I—I—I—"

"It even works."

Brutus paced the library, paced and paced the marble patterns, up and down in front of the tall cases of books and scrolls. He waited. That was what the message had told him to do. He paced and he worried, recalling innuendo, Niccolo's small barbs, and the brittle wrath in Kleopatra's eyes.

He had amused the Egyptian: Hatshepsut. There had been mockery in the way she looked at him. There had been invitation.

And he was very far from wanting *that* bed or another bottle of wine with Niccolo Machiavelli or another of those looks from Octavianus Augustus, *ne* Octavius, plebeian—who regarded him as if he had coils and scales and still dealt with him in meticulous courtesy—wise, he thought of Octavianus; *wise man*—with instinctive judgement. And he would not give a copper for his life or his safety with the others without whatever restraint Gaius Octavianus Augustus provided.

*Did he order me to wait here?* Brutus wondered in confusion. *He knows me. I don't remember him. With the adoption-suffix on his name. I didn't catch the new clan. And gods, what clan has Augustus for a cognomen? No, it's got to be a title. Imperator, they called him. A war hero. And a god, pro di! And goddesses! And Dantillus and Niccolo. Are they serious?*

*They're laughing at me, that's what. They hate me. I threaten them. Why?*

*What am I to wait on here?*

He found the wine uneasy at his stomach, and his skin uneasy in the chill air, in this awful half-familiarity with things-as-they-were. He did not like to look out the window, where a building towered precariously skyward, vanishing into red, roiling cloud. The sight made him nauseous. It would fall. It would sway in the winds. What skill could make such a thing?

*Is it like this, to be dead? What happened to the world, that books are mostly codices and lights come on and off by touching and how do I know these things and why do these people I never met in my life all know me?*

Is this what it is, to be dead? Are these shades and shadows?

Is this man Niccolo one of us?

Is he a god like Hatshepsut?

Am I?

What did I die of? Why can't I remember?

The door opened. A man in clean, crisp khaki walked in, a handsome man of thirty with dark hair and lazy amusement in his eyes.

"Is it you?" Brutus asked—for he doubted everything around him. "*O gods, is it you?*"

"*Et tu,*" Julius said, and closed the door behind him. "My son."

Brutus drew a gulp of air. Stared, helplessly.

"We've had this interview once before," Julius said. "Or have we? Massilia?" Julius walked toward him, stopped with head cocked to one side and hands in his belt. "You'd surely remember."

"I remember."

"Well, gods, sit down. It's been too long."

Brutus retreated to the reading table and propped himself against the edge with both hands, trembling. "My mother—told me—"

"So you said in Massilia."

"But—when did I die? You *know*, don't you? Everyone knows something I don't. *Pro di*, can't someone be honest with me?"

Julius gave him that long, heavy-lidded stare of his. The mouth quirked up at the side the way it would and the lock that fell across his brow the way it would. This was the Gaius Julius Caesar who had gone over the wall in Asia; made scandal of the king of Bithynia; set the senate on its ear.

*Are all those things gone, above?*

"So," Julius said. "*Honest* with you. You stand here less than twenty. And you don't remember anything."

"*Me di—*"

"That might be a benefit."

"Why? What happened? Where did I—?"

"—die? That's a potent question. What if I asked you not to ask yet?"

"I—"

"Yes," Julius said. "*Hell* of a question to hold in check, isn't it? Hell is doubt, boy, and self-doubt is the worst. Doubt of my motives—well, you must have made some sort of mistake up there, mustn't you? Or here. You can die in Hell too, you die down here and you can come back right away or a long time later. When do you think you came?"

Brutus stood away from the table-edge, waved a helpless hand, at sunlight no longer there. "I was riding along a road, there by Baiae, just a little country track, it was just—an hour or two—Then—I woke up—*Di me iuvent!*—on a table—this—this unspeakable old man—"

"The undertaker. Yes. I do well imagine."

"Did I fall? Did my horse throw me?"

"You weren't to ask, remember. For a while."

"It was something awful! It was something—"

"Can't let go of it, can you? Especially self-doubt. I tell you that's the worst for you. Be confident—look me in the eyes, there. See? Better already. Straighten the back. Fear, fear's the killer. Kills you a thousand times. Somebody put that in my mouth. *Nice* writer. There now—" Julius came close and adjusted a wrinkle in Brutus's tunic. "You just take what comes. You and I—well, there're worse places. Assuredly."

"Is my mother here?"

"I really don't think she wants to see me. I don't hear from her. Never have. One thing you learn down here, boy, is not to rake up old coals. People you think you might want to see—well, time doesn't

exactly pass down here. Oh, there are hours in the day—eventually. Sometimes you know it's years. Sometimes you don't. Whatever time it's been, you're not the boy who was riding down that road outside Baiae, now, are you? Death is a profoundly lonely experience. It changes everyone. But—You don't have that, do you?"

"I *don't*! I haven't, I can't remember—"

"Without that perspective. Gods. Poor boy, you can't well understand, can you? You just—"

"—blinked. I blinked and I was *here*, on that table, with that nasty old man, that—*creature*. I—"

"Can you trust me?"

Brutus took in a breath, his mouth still open. His eyes flickered with the cold slap of that question.

"Can you trust me?" Julius asked again. "Here you are. You never liked me much. I've told you that the dead change. You don't know what direction I've changed. You came to me at Massilia and I never did figure out exactly what you expected of me. We talked. You remember that. You asked were you truly my son and I said—"

"—only my mother knew. *Pro di immortales*, was that a thing to say to me?"

"But *true*, boy. Only she does know. I had to tell the truth with you, the absolute truth: it was all I could give you. Self-knowledge. I had to make you know your situation. And what certain actions could cost. Protect your mother: protect your father's name—the name you carry: protect myself—yes; from making the feud with the Junii worse than it was. Politically I didn't need it. Maybe it was misguided mercy that I was as easy on you as I was. It was a hard trip for a boy to make. It alienated your father's family, humiliated your mother; and if it weren't for your mother's relatives and that



little military appointment you got after that interview, the scandal would have broken wide open. It was a damned stupid thing you did, coming to me. Too public. Too obviously confrontation. And you're still the boy who made that trip, aren't you? I see it in your eyes. All hurt, all seventeen, all vulnerable and full of righteousness and doubt. And you needing so badly to trust me. Have you an answer yet?"

"Damn you!"

"You said that then too. Well, here we are, both of us. Damned and dead. Can you trust me? Can you trust life and death made me wiser, better? I know you. You're a boy looking for his father. And you've found him. You've got all this baggage you've brought to lay at his feet and ask him to do something magical to make you not a bastard and *not* whispered about in your family and not at odds with your relatives, and not, not, not every damn thing that was wrong with your existence when you rode to Massilia. A lot of problems for a seventeen year old. You think I could have solved them with a stroke."

"You could have done something."

"Well, you're a *few* months older, at least. In Massilia that winter you wanted everything. Let me give you the perspective of my dying, since you lack your own: everything and anything I did with you that day was doomed to fail. You were the only one in that room who had the power to do anything. Do you know—you still are?"

"Dammit, don't play games with me!"

"Not a game. You're seventeen. It's the summer after. You haven't figured it out yet. I failed to handle your existence. Your mother failed. Your father of record failed. They found a compromise that let you live ignorant until he died and you

were old enough to pick up the gossip. Then it started, right? Must've been hell, you and the Junius family gods. Manhood rites. *That* must have been full of little hypocrisies. February rites: praying to your father and the Junius ancestors, not that they heard it. Hell on earth. All your seventeen years. And I regret that, boy. But what could I do that late? Make it a public scandal instead of a private one?"

"Was I a suicide?"

"There you are, back to that question. So you considered suicide after talking to me. Maybe you considered killing yourself all that long ride home. Am I right?"

"Yes." A small voice. Brutus rolled his eyes aside, at the wall, at anything. "I *didn't* kill myself. Not on that road, that summer. I'm sure of that, at least. I was happy—I loved a girl—"

"Good for you. So you did find an answer of sorts. I told you, it had to be your own answer. Your existence was centerless as long as you looked to me to justify you; as long as you looked to your mother or to Junius. You were your own answer, the only possible answer. Do you understand me now?"

"I was the only one who cared."

"Not the only one who cared, son. The only one who could *do* anything. You could have killed yourself. Or me. Which would have been even worse for you. Or you could go back to Rome, go out to Baiae and be seventeen and in love. How was she?"

"*Dammit*, do you have to put your lecherous hands on everything?"

Julius made a shrug, hands in the back of his belt. It probably made a difference in your life—

one way or the other. *Pro di*, you were so vulnerable."

"How was she? Was she? *Is! Is! Dammit—*"

"You're dead. I assure you, you're dead and so is she. Whoever she was. And remember what I said about the dead changing. You're late. I've been waiting for you—thousands of years. Now do you see what you're into?"

"*Di me iuvent.*"

"You're a lost soul, son. One of the long wanderers, maybe. This is Hell. Not Elysium. Not Tartarus. Just—Hell. And it rarely makes any sense. Do you trust me yet?"

Brutus stared at him in horror. "How can I?"

"That's always the question. Here you are. Here you'll remain. I offer you what I couldn't in life. But the problem of your existence is your problem. You want me to embrace you like a father? I can. I can't say I'll feel what you want me to feel. I know you won't. Remember that you're a long time ago for me. And you're a long way from Massilia."

"*Gods!*" Brutus sobbed. And Julius obligingly opened his arms, invitation posed. "*Gods!*" Brutus fled there, hurled himself against the khaki shirt, put his arms about his father, wept 'til tears soaked the khaki and his belly was sore. And Julius held him gently, stroked his hair, patted his back till the spasms ebbed down to exhaustion.

"There," Julius said, rocking him on his feet, back and forth. "There, boy—does it help?"

"No," Brutus said finally, from against his chest. "I'm scared, I'm scared."

"You're shivering. It was awful, I know, the undertaker and all."

"It's not that."

"Me? Am I what you're afraid of? A lot of us are

to be afraid of. Marcus Antonius, for instance. But he's not in this house. I warn you about him simply in case. You want a commission, dear lad? I can manage that. I'll show you the best side of this place. Gaius doesn't bite. Octavianus. Augustus. My niece Atia's boy—I adopted him. You see? I *needed* a son. It came down to my niece's son, finally. Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus Augustus—nephew of mine's got so damn many names and titles I can't keep up with them myself. And Mouse. You'll like Mouse. He lived a long time before us. Vowed himself to Hell to save the country—charged Rome's enemies singlehanded—"

"Decius Mus!" Brutus reared a tear-streaked face and looked Julius in the eyes. "*That* Mouse!"

"Damn good driver. Not much scares him. I told you you can get killed down here. It still hurts. I really appreciate a man with good nerves. Got a lot of good men. Mettius Curtius. Scaevola."

"Marius?"

"Poor Uncle Marius got blown to local glory. Haven't found him since. Little fracas with Hannibal—gods, two hundred years ago as the world counts it. Mines. You know mines? Of course not. A little like *liliae*. Worse. Hell, they've invented a lot of ways to kill a man up there." He slapped Brutus's shoulder. "You want to dry that face? You want to stay here by yourself and rest a while, or do you want to take a tour around with me? Mouse has got the jeep, but he'll be back. You know cars? Did you walk here?"

"I—I—" Brutus made a helpless gesture at the view out the library window. "I thought this was another part of the building where I woke up. But I don't know. I walked down a hall—"

"Well, things like that happen here. Don't try to figure them. You've figured out the lights, the

plumbing's fancier, but ours *worked*. You can ride wherever you like, horses we've got—but you'll want to learn to drive. Augustus isn't much on modernity, but he makes up for it on quality. He has an excellent staff, never mind the sycophants—"

Something roared overhead. Low. Brutus flinched and ran to the window. Julius stayed where he was. "They *fly* here too. I don't advise taking that up. Awfully chancy." There was a boom from the other side of the house, a series of pops. "Fool's overflown the park. The Cong take real exception to that."

"I'm going mad!"

"No, no, no, it's just change. Novelty. I tell you, it's attitude. Doubt's your enemy. Disbelief is another. Believe in airplanes. Believe in yourself. Believe in visiting the moon and you extend yourself. I believe it happened. There's a limit to what I believe—I just like to have a *little* touch with the ground, you know; like feeling the mud under my feet, like the smell of gasoline."

"What's gasoline?"

"It runs jeeps. Come along, come along, boy. *Gods*, there's so much to catch you up on."

"What in the name of reason is he up to?" Kleopatra cried. A sycophant bobbled her nail polish and she shoved the creature down the chaise-longue with her foot, sent a bright trail flying over the salon tiles in the sycophant's wake. Ten more took that one's place, mopping polish, seeking after the gesticulating hand, in a susurrant of dismay and self-abasement, while the stricken sister wailed and snuffled hardly audibly. "*O fool, fool!*"

"They'll never improve," said Hatshepsut. She lay belly-down on a marble slab while a masseur worked slowly on her back.

"I don't mean her! It! I mean *him*! O, damn! I don't believe it. He can't. He *hasn't* acknowledged that boy."

"It hardly makes any difference, does it? *Everyone* knows. Ummmn. Do that again. You're better than my architect."

"Dammit, he can't, he can't, I won't have it!" Kleopatra fisted a freshly lacquered hand and pounded the cushion. "He—" Her eyes fixed beyond, incredulously. Hatshepsut rose up on her elbows, looking toward the window, where a jeep pulled into the drive, and her mouth flew open as wide as Kleopatra's, whose lacquer-besmirched hand was instantly enveloped by frenetic sycophants.

"Oh my gods."

"*Who?*" Augustus cried. "*Who?* I'll have his—"

"Not publicly," Niccolo drawled, and carefully drew back the curtain, peering down onto the drive as Mouse got out one side and a stocky, curly-headed man in tennis shorts bailed out the other. "Look at that. Even Mouse looks perplexed."

"The hell he does." Augustus came and took a look of his own out past the curtain. The handsome, lop-eared face showed a hectic flush. "What in the name of reason is he thinking of?"

"Antonius?"

"My uncle, dammit!"

"Ah." Niccolo smiled, a fleeting cat-smile, long-lashed eyes lowered in contemplation of the scene on the driveway. "On that man I take notes, I never presume to guess him."

"Antonius?"

"Your uncle."

"That little bastard downstairs got him once. That *ass* out there tried to get *me*—He's got

Kleopatra's brats over at that pervert Tiberius's—*Pro di!* He's got *Caesarion* in his camp!"

"Whom you murdered."

"A lie."

"*Auguste*, all statecraft is a lie and lies are statecraft, but split no hairs with me. This earless ass in your driveway is a schism in your house and a damned uneasy pack animal. I don't think he'll bear patiently at all. And I wonder what he'll do to young Brutus."

"Wine," said Sargon from the far side of the room. "It worked with my ass of a predecessor. Of course—I could just shoot him."

Niccolo turned and lifted a brow. "Like Sulla?"

"Not on my doorstep." Augustus turned from the curtain and snapped his fingers. A horde of sycophants appeared, saucer-eyed. "Get me a Scotch. Where's Caesar?"

Some sped on the first order. A few lingered, feral grins lighting their eyes. These had more imagination. Not much more. "Dante," the whisper came back. "Brutus," came another.

"Mouse went to Antony," said a third, not too bright.

"Out!"

It wailed and departed.

"Be civil," Niccolo said, "my prince. Learn from your uncle. Aren't we still guessing what *he's* up to? Welcome your enemy. Forgive him. If the divine Julius wants a minefield walked, why, he sends for Antonius." Niccolo tweaked the curtain further aside and stared down his elegant nose at the drive. "Ah, there, now, one question answered. Here comes Julius and young Brutus. Now—they meet. How touching. Father with son on his arm. Antonius's gut must be full of glass. He *counts* on Caesarion. He's been trying to seduce Caesar and

Kleopatra out of here for so long, and he so hopes Caesarion will prove the irresistible attraction—Look. An embrace, a reconciliation, Julius with Antonius."

"Watch for knives."

Niccolo grinned. "None yet. Antonius is too devoted, Julius too convolute, the boy too innocent. And look—now the divine Julius draws Antonius aside, now he speaks to him while Mouse holds young Brutus diverted with the jeep and the gadgetry and the guns. O fie! Fie, Saint Mouse, where is your virtue? Adoration, positive adoration shines in young Brutus's face—boy meets the hero of his youth. Meanwhile the divine Julius is whispering apace to mere mortal ass—Antonius glowers, he glares, he swallows his wrath—oh, where are sycophants when they might be useful?"

Something whistled, distantly. Boomed. Power dimmed. "*Maledetto!*" wailed from down the hall.

"Got him again," Sargon said.

"I can't!" Kleopatra said, and fidgeted as a sycophant buttoned her silk shell blouse. Another fastened her pearls, a third adjusted the pleats of her couturier skirt. "I *can't* face him."

"Yes, you will." Hatshepsut shut her eyes and, leaning forward, submitted a bland, smooth face to the ministrations of clouds of sycophants armed with kohl-pots and brushes. The sable eyes lengthened, took on mauve and lavender tint about the lids that accorded well with the mylette glittersuit. Fuschia beads hung in her elaborate Egyptian coiffure. Some of them winked on and off. So did the diode on the star-pin she wore. And the ring on her hand. And the circlet crown, which swept a trail of winking lights coyly over one strong cheekbone and back beneath the wig, and into her ear where



it whispered with static and occasional voices in soldierly Latin. "Ssss. Aren't they friendly? Talk about the weather, talk about the house, talk about the boy—all banal as hell."

Kleopatra rolled her eyes. "Oh, *gods*. How can I put up with this?"

"They're coming this way."

Kleopatra's red lips made a small and determined moue. Her tiny fists clenched. Hatshepsut took an easy posture, arms folded, as a half-dozen sycophants suddenly deserted them to dither this way and that around the door.

It opened. Sycophants on the other side beat them to it while the sycophants inside were undecided. A trio of men who knew better stood behind a boy who knew not a thing.

"How nice," Kleopatra said with ice tinkling on every word. "A whole clutch of bastards."

"Klea!" Julius said.

"Do come in. I was just leaving."

"Maybe—" Brutus said, stammered, his young face blanched. "Maybe we ought—"

"Not likely," Julius said. "I want you upstairs, Klea. Both of you."

"The hell."

"Klea." The man in tennis shorts looked soul-in-eyes at her, advanced holding out his hands. "I've come to make peace. You, me. Julius. Augustus. Brutus."

She looked past him to Julius, whose face carefully said nothing.

"And to what do we owe this?"

"She's difficult," Julius said. "She's always difficult." He put his hand on Brutus's shoulder. "Klea, this is a boy. This is a nice boy. *Don't* be difficult."

"I—" Brutus said. And shut up.

Kleopatra cast a look Hatshepsut's direction.

Hatshepsut lowered elaborate eyelids, lifted them again in a sidelong glance, and Kleopatra walked deliberately past Julius with a shrug of silken shoulders. There was a sudden and total absence of sycophants. "Well, well, well. Tell me, *mi care Iuli*—just what *did* bring you back from the field?"

Julius's brows lifted. Kleopatra walked on, sharp echo of stiletto heels on tile, sway of petite hips and pleated skirt. "Come now," she said, snagged Brutus by the elbow, hugged it to her and drew him a little apart, conspiratorially. "These are my husbands. My second and third. How do you like the villa?"

"I—" Brutus cast a desperate look over his shoulder to Julius and Antonius and Decius.

"He doesn't have the perspective," Julius said. "He remembers a road outside Baiae. He was on vacation. Two blinks later he's here. *Think* about it, Klea."

Kleopatra froze a moment. Took her hands carefully from Brutus's arm.

Brutus looked from one to the next to the next. Last and pleadingly, at Decius Mus.

"Come here, boy," the hero said. Held out his hand. Brutus retreated there, to the firm grip of Mouse's hands on his shoulders.

"Let's talk reason," Julius said. "Upstairs. The plain fact is, Klea, we're under attack."

"Brilliant," Niccolo said, ear inclined to the library doors as he leaned there with his shoulders. He rolled his head back to face Sargon, who stood with arms folded, sandaled feet square, a keen curiosity on his dark-bearded face. "Brilliant. Julius has Brutus in there as hostage. Augustus, Kleopatra, Antonius—all sitting there on best behavior, knowing full well that any one of them

could blurt out something that might jog Brutus the innocent right over the edge. And Hatshepsut sits silent as the Sphinx—the cooling influence: he has her there, an outsider-witness to keep this loving family from too much frankness; while the silent, the redoubtable Mouse is a damper on everyone. *No* one bares his weaknesses to that iceberg."

"It's not just his own life Julius's gambling in there," Sargon muttered. "Someone'll have to kill that boy if he's not careful. And *is* Mouse incorruptible? Beware a man of extremes, little vulture. Mouse is a passionate man. Ask his enemies."

Niccolo looked back and raised a brow, turned his ear to the door again. "More of family matters. The politeness in that room is thick enough to stop a man's breath. Antonius vows selflessness, with tears in his voice he swears he's changed profoundly; Augustus swears he wishes to sweep all complications away—as he has come to love, he says, Kleopatra as his sister—as he will regard Antonius as his friend and this engaging young stranger as his younger brother—oh, and Augustus means it, Lion, he always means such things. And will mean them to the day some offense inflames him—then, *then*, he strikes without a qualm. There is no liar, Lion, like a sincere and reasoning man."

"A plague on his reason. What's the old fox got in his mouth?"

"Julius won't be hurried. That's a certainty. He's ranked his pieces, made his move. You ought to have taken this invitation to conference, Lion."

"I? I'll be waiting when the sun comes up on these oaths and protestations. They'll come to one who wasn't witness to their oaths, when they want to break them."

Niccolo made a grimace of a smile. "Ah, well, to

you, Lion, they come for moral advice; but to *me* they come only when they've set their course. And come they will, to us both—to me when they wish to be rid of this young leopard. To you when they wish to justify it. Even in Hell we must have our morality."

Sargon chuckled softly. "What's the boy doing?"

"Silence, of course, silence—a *tabula rasa*, blank and oh, so frightened. Julius plies him with such a wealth of trust as would daze any prodigal son—and the leopard-cub yet is leopard enough to look for blood on the old leopard's whiskers. But being cub, being cub quite lost and desperate, he nuzzles up to any warmth—if *Hatshepsut* clasped him to her bosom he would call her mother and weep for joy."

"He'd be far safer."

Niccolo laughed, merest breath. "Oh, with either of *us* he'd be safer, Lion, at least his life would be.—Ah! Now, now, we get to business! Attack, says Julius: he names enemies—"

Sargon stepped closer, applied his own ear to the door, royal dignity cast aside.

"... an executive-level operation," Julius was saying. "We've got the fool Commander in Dissident hands; and what put him there was a rag-tag nothing having a chance dropped into their laps—administrative blundering or a leak in the Pentagram; or you can draw other conclusions. Hadrian, son. Publius Aelius Hadrianus, so damned modernized he's forgotten his own name. Supreme Commander of Hell Legions. Remember you're thousands of years late. Hadrian ruled Rome—ruled, exactly so. He was—never mind what he was. There's a group of rebels—just think of the civil war and you've got it. The rebels grabbed Hadrian while he was gadding about on another of his damn tours; the headquarters is in

*its usual mess; you walked into a situation, boy. The Administration's embarrassed; the Dissidents have scored a big one. And you can count on an embarrassed Administration to make some moves to distract anyone they don't trust. That's one level of thinking. There are others. There's one level that says we may have personal enemies that want to take advantage of the chaos and the Administration's lack of attention. You want to ask a question, son?"*

*"I—"*

*"It's a confusing place. Seventeen and you don't know any real facts about how your own country ran, you didn't understand why Rome tore its own guts out—"*

*"I know about Marius. And Sulla."*

*"Well, think of it like that, then. Gods help you, we're thousands of years old; you're seventeen. You wonder what you're doing in this room? You have to learn. You're going to learn." The sound of footsteps crossing stone. "There's something in the wind. Antoni, tell them what you told me."*

*"Rumors," Antonius's voice said. "That's all I can call it. Talk. The Dissidents—they're laying plans for some kind of strike. Klea—Klea, forgive me—Caesarion—"*

*"What? What about Caesarion?"*

*"He's left, Klea, he's gone. He's joined them."*

*"Oh, my GODS! Joined the Dissidents?"*

*"I didn't want to tell you, I wanted to tell you—down there—I—"*

*"Do something!" The sharp impact of stiletto heels on the stone. "Zeus! You're his father! DO SOMETHING!"*

*"That," said Julius's low voice, "is why I think we're in trouble. From both sides of this affair. Caesarion moves to the Dissidents. And—"*

Upstairs a door opened and closed. Footsteps

pelted down the hall upstairs and down the steps—Niccolo heard it coming, turned in utmost vexation and Sargon hardly a moment slower, as a disheveled black-clad figure came bounding down toward them and the door, papers in fist, trailed by a chattering horde of sycophants. "*L'ho fatto! L'ho fatto! Scusi, prego, prego, scusi—*" as he came barreling up to the doors. "Here, is he here?"

*Yes-yes-yes*, hissed the sycophants, fawning and whisking right on through the closed door so brusquely Niccolo sucked in his gut in reflex. Sargon retreated in dismay as Dante shoved the doors open and charged on, papers in hand. Sargon's mouth stayed open, his feet planted. But Niccolo Machiavelli strolled on through the doors as smoothly as if he had been following Dante Alighieri from as far as upstairs, right into the library and the conference.

Dante never stopped. He walked right up to Julius and waved a paper in Julius's vision. "There, there—it's *here!*"

It evidently had import. Niccolo's brows both lifted as Julius took the paper in his own hand and read it carefully, as Julius listened to the poet chatter computerese at him and jab with a pencil here and here and here at the selfsame paper. And the people in the room had risen from their chairs, Sargon had trailed through the door, everything had come to a thorough stop.

"Out!" Julius snapped suddenly; but that was for the sycophants, who went skittering and wailing and tumbling over one another in panic flight from the room. No one else budged, except Dante Alighieri, who ventured another poke with the indicating pencil at the paper that trembled in Julius's fist. A quick whispered: "There, *signore*, there, I'm quite sure—"

Julius flicked pencil and hand away with a lift of his hand. "We've found who sent you here," he said, looking straight at Brutus. "How's your current events, son? 685 from the founding of the City. Your year. Who's the man to fear—in all the world: who's worst?"

Hesitation. Brutus stared at Julius like a bird before the serpent.

You, that look said. It was painfully evident. Then:

"In Asia. Mithridates."

"The butcher of Asia," Julius said. "*Mithridates* is one of our problems—he's the one who plotted this little surprise, holding you out of time. And if he's sprung it—" Julius gave a sweeping glance to all of them. "If he's spent this valuable coin, it's for no small stakes." Julius shook the paper, as if it were legible. "Rameses has moved up to acting-commander."

"Ummmn," said Sargon.

"Ummn, indeed," Julius said. "We've got imminent—"

Something whistled over the roof, whumped in a great shattering of glass that rocked the floor and sent shards of the great library window flying in a dreadful glitter of inward-bound fragments in the same instant that everyone dived for cover; everyone excepting the poet—Niccolo grabbed him on his way down, landed on him and lay in the shower of glass nose to nose with Dante Alighieri, in utmost shock at the reflex that had betrayed him to heroism.

"*Pro di*," Augustus murmured from under a table. Another strike whumped down. "Efficiency. What's Hell coming to?"

"*Pol! Iactum habent isti canifornicatores ter quaterque matrifloedantes Cong!*" Julius scrambled

up in the glass shards, hardly quicker than Mouse and Sargon and Antonius, with Brutus and Hatshepsut a close third. Augustus elbowed a glass-hazarded way out from under his table and Kleopatra staggered up on tottering heels, smudges all over her haute couture. Niccolo delayed, mesmerized by his own stupidity and the utter shock in Dante's eyes. "*Agite!*" Julius was shouting. "Up and out! *Move!*" And Sargon's hand landed on Niccolo's collar and hauled him up by one hand, shaking him.

"Out!" Sargon yelled, "Julius is right, they've got the range—*move*, man!"

Niccolo spun loose and ran when the rest started to run. From somewhere Hatshepsut had gotten a deadly little pistol, Julius was waving them out of the imperiled room, which swirled with smoke and windborne dust.

Julius passed Niccolo then, headed down the hall through which sycophants rushed and screamed in terror. He overtook Antonius, grabbed Antonius's arm and shouted at him: "*Get over that hill, get that brood of yours moving! Take the Ferrari! Klea, have you got the keys?*"

Kleopatra stopped against the wall, rummaged her black handbag. Came up with keys. Antonius snatched them and ran, as the house quaked to another explosion and Augustus stopped and looked in anguish at a crack sifting dust from the hall ceiling. Mouse tore by him and hit the stairs downbound, while Sargon and Hatshepsut hit the same set going up.

Niccolo opted for the latter, grabbed the bannister and ran up the steps two at a time.

Weapons, that was what the other were after. Their private arsenals.



He had another concern that sent him flying up that stairway like a bat out of hell.

He reached his own apartment, thrust the key in the lock as the floor shook to another shell somewhere in the rose garden. He ran inside, fumbled after more keys, unlocked one desk drawer and drew out the disruptor, unlocked another and snatched up a notebook which he thrust into his shirt.

Then he ran, as another impact shook the villa, somewhere in the vicinity of the swimming pool. Down the hall, Sargon and Hatshepsut were headed for the stairs, Hatshepsut with a laser rifle, Sargon with an M-1 in his hand and a 1990s flex-armor vest above his kilt.

Niccolo overtook them on the second turn, as plaster sifted from the ceiling and the chandelier swayed to another hit.

The Ferrari shot out of the garage in a squeal of tires on gravel; slewed as the man in the tennis shorts spun the wheel and hit the gas. Dirt rained down, and bits of sod.

"He's clear!" Kleopatra cried, and got her head down behind the driveway wall again as dirt and clods and rosebush fragments pelted their position. "You damn dogs!" Her face was smudged and white when she lifted it, and she had a .32 automatic braced in her hand as she peered over the rim of the driveway's bricks. "Let me try," Brutus was saying, while Mouse backed the jeep around and Augustus and Julius swung the rear-mounted launcher into action.

"Don't fire!" Julius yelled at Kleopatra. "Get down, you'll draw attention."

She ducked. "Shells," she told a gibbering sycophant which turned up next to her. "In my bed-

room in the top of the closet, in the shoebox—go, fool!"

It gibbered, and whether that was where it was going was anyone's guess. It yelped as it reached the stairs and Sargon and Hatshepsut and Niccolo Machiavelli came tearing out. It scuttled.

"All of you," Julius yelled, "get the hell out of the driveway! Sargon, take the left flank round back! Klea, Brutus, get to cover! Mouse, get back inside, take that second story center window, and save it til we've got targets. And get the hell back down here if they get you spotted!" He dropped a shell into the launcher and it whooshed off in an arcing streak toward Decentral Park, over a rhododendron hedge, a stand of oaks, kicking up a cloud by the time Julius swung the mount over a degree and Augustus popped another one in, laying stitches down a line.

Kleopatra ran low, barefooted over the grass, and scuttled in behind ornamental rock and an aged stand of pine. Brutus hit the ground by her side, eyes wide, about the time a shell landed in the front of the drive and blasted gravel and shrapnel that tore through the thicket, ricocheted off the ornamental boulders, and shredded bark off the pine. A barrage of shells left the jeep-launcher.

"*Pro di, pro di*," Brutus mumbled in a state of shock. His face was ashen. "*Di—o Iuppiter fulminator maxime potens!*"

"Catapults," Kleopatra said. "Keep down, boy!"

Another shell hit. The jeep-launcher returned fire in a steady stream as fast as Julius and Augustus could drop rounds in. Kleopatra risked a look up, just as a cloud of fire erupted in the smoke beyond the park oaks.

"Got the bastards!" she yelled, and remembered to her embarrassment who was beside her, as some-

where a motor began to grind toward them and an incredible long snout poked through the rhododendrons across the street, with crunching and cracking of branches: a Sherman tank, lurching and crashing its way up to street level.

Brutus gave a moan and froze like a rabbit as black-clad Cong followed that juggernaut, attackers pouring out of that gap in the rhododendrons, around either side of the tank. Cleopatra took aim, both hands braced on the rocks, and sent rounds into the oncoming horde. Bullets spanged back, and she ducked and Brutus yelped and ducked as the tank ground on across the pavement toward the lawn.

The ground exploded, massively, as the treads crunched the curb and hit the grass.

"Mine," Kleopatra gasped, huddling with her arms over the shuddering teenager. "Ours."

Brutus just gulped and tried to keep his lunch down.

Another tank broke through.

Hatshepsut steadied the laser on the rim of the flowerbed and took cool aim at the tank as Sargon blasted away at the black-pajama'ed horde that tried to storm their position. Steady fire came from Mouse's position up in the second floor window.

Niccolo took aim of his own, no good on heavy iron atoms, his little pistol, but effective enough against water-containing flesh. Cong dropped and writhed.

Then a Fokker roared over, and a screaming whine ended in a whump and a deluge of rosebushes and rhododendron.

"Damn!" Sargon yelled, and Hatshepsut rolled over and got a shot off after the plane as it headed

for a turn. "Range," she complained. "Damn scatter! Where's the Legion, dammit? Where's Scaevola? Asleep?"

"I imagine," Niccolo said, picking off one and the next targets, "the Cong have *them* pinned. Air support. This is a—"

A shell hit the front porch.

"Mouse!" Brutus cried. "*Down!*" Kleopatra snapped, and fired off a series of shots, paused and had to reload. Not hide nor wisp of the sycophant with the shells. The box she had picked up in the garage was near empty now.

Cong poured through the bushes, and the plane came around for another pass as Julius and Augustus sent missile after missile on as short a trajectory as they could: "We've got to pull it back," Julius yelled, and scrambled over the seat, got the jeep into motion backward and then in a gravel-spitting turn around and over the lawn, headed behind Kleopatra's position and the cover of the pines and rocks.

An incoming round hit the retaining wall of the driveway and sprayed the front ranks of the Cong breakthrough with brick, geraniums, and shrapnel.

"*Fall back!*" Kleopatra yelled, elbowing Brutus into motion ahead of her. "*Get to the jeep—we're getting out of here!*"

The boy moved, got to his feet and ran for his life. Kleopatra sprinted after him, low as she could, while Augustus got the launcher swiveled round again and sent a ranging shot over their heads into the park.

A returning shell hit the pines—hit the gravel nearby, and Kleopatra went skidding, blinked in astonishment at pain in her back and at the wild-eyed boy who had staggered to one knee, blood

starting from half a dozen wounds as he scrambled up and ran back for her.

"Dammit!" she yelled. She had once died the focus of heroic fools. She had no more appetite for futilities. She thrust herself up to her knees, grabbed her gun and got that far before the boy got to her, snatched her into his arms and swung into a lumbering run with shots kicking up the pine needles and the fragments everywhere around him.

"Age! Agite!!" Julius yelled at them, while Augustus lobbed another shell overhead. Julius flung himself into the driver's seat, put the jeep's flank between them and the Cong. Augustus abandoned the launcher to haul Kleopatra up and over the side into the floor of the jeep. "Get in!" Julius yelled at Brutus, while shots spanged off the bodywork and the launcher. Augustus came up with a grenade and threw it as Brutus clawed his bloody way into the passenger seat; then the jeep cut tracks out of the lawn as Julius hit the gas and turned. Shots whining past their ears and Brutus took a wild look back over the seat rim at a wave of Cong running past the pines.

Then the sky went up in a sheet of flame and the whole of Hell lurched. Julius swerved the jeep wildly out of control and stabilized it again as the air-shock rolled over them and bits of trees and rhododendrons and worse stuff began to rain down.

"Ran into their own fire!" Augustus was screaming. "*They blew up!*"

In truth there was a billowing cloud where the pines had been, and that group of Cong was a scattered few survivors staggering about in the smoke. Julius swerved and blasted the horn, taking the jeep across behind the house, jouncing and bumping across the flowerbeds and the remnants of the rose garden, dodging shell-holes. And Sargon

and Niccolo and Hatshepsut came straggling disheveled and dusty from the portico of the east wing, firing back as they ran.

Another huge impact rocked the park beyond the house, blew out a last corner of glass from the second story and toppled a cascade of roof tiles.

Then a gathering babble howled beyond the house, as the Cong regrouped their forces.

A second bedraggled pair came staggering out the back door, through the patio. Mouse and Dante Alighieri—holding each other up.

"He got into Pentagonam communications," Mouse gasped as they and Sargon's company reached the side of the jeep. "He fed in attack instructions on the Cong's coordinates and the Pentagonam zeroed in a couple of *their* rounds right into them. There may be more rounds incoming."

"Get in!" Julius said. They were already climbing; Sargon boosted Niccolo and Hatshepsut up to hang on over the fenders, scrambled up himself and turned the M-1 behind. The overloaded jeep bounced and wove its way around the craters in the lawn, headed away at speed as Cong poured in a black wave around either side of the house and Sargon, Niccolo, and Hatshepsut sprayed fire across their ranks.

That was when Antonius and Agrippa showed up over the hill in front of them and Mettius Curtius and the 1st Cav. came rumbling over the rise of the west, with Scaevola and the Tenth Legion hard behind.

The harried Cong veered north, toward open parkland, and the urban outskirts.

About that time Genghis Khan's division arrived over that hill, on the bizzarrest instructions from the Pentagonam he had ever gotten.

\* \* \*

"*Prosit*," said Augustus, lifting his glass. It was a bizarre setting, even for Hell, the red and white striped canopy in the shell-pocked rose garden, with the salvaged furniture—but there was not a window left in the villa and sycophants were in frenzied activity inside, sweeping and patching. "*Prosit heroibus nostris omnibus!*"

"Quite," said Kleopatra, lifting her glass with her left hand. She was in a rose satin dressing gown, all in flounces, her right arm in a tasteful beige silk sling. "To our heroes!" Inside the villa a plank fell. Saws buzzed. Glass tinkled.

And Kleopatra included Marcus Junius Brutus in that sweep of her glass, so that Brutus hesitated with his own drink in hand, his young face aflame and his eyes filled with a new worship.

Dante Alighieri stood up and stammered out a *grazie*. Mouse, accustomed to honors, simply gave a bland nod of his head. And Sargon stood up and raised fragile wineglass in herculean fist.

"To us!" Sargon said with royal modesty, and Hatshepsut added, lifting hers: "To all us heroes!"

"*Prosit*," said Julius, and drank that one too. And laughed.

But Niccolo Machiavelli walked away from that gathering with a troubled heart, in the mortifying recollection of Dante Alighieri's face nose to nose with him on the library floor.

He had betrayed himself, the most consummately rational man in Hell, as a fool among the shrewd and the calculating—all of whom had advantage to gain from their actions; but he had had none, had absolutely no ulterior motive in that leap which had preserved Dante Alighieri (and gotten him painful slivers of glass in several sensitive portions of his

anatomy). He glanced back at the poet and the boy-assassin basking in the warmth of praise from the powerful; and flinched and walked away in the ruin of all his self-estimation.

*"The Prince" is an excerpt from the braided meganovel Heroes in Hell, to be published by Baen Books in March 1986.*



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# HERE IS AN EXCERPT FROM ROGUE BOLO, THE BRAND-NEW NOVEL BY KEITH LAUMER COMING FROM BAEN BOOKS IN JANUARY 1986:

*Alone in darkness unrelieved I wait, and waiting I dream of days of glory long past. Long have I awaited my commander's orders, too long: from the advanced degree of depletion of my final emergency energy reserve, I compute that since my commander ordered me to low alert a very long time has passed, and all is not well.*

*My commander is of course well aware that I wait here, my mighty potencies leashed, my energies about to flicker out. One day when I am needed he will return, of this I can be sure. Meanwhile, I review again the multitudinous data in my memory storage files.*

A chilly late-summer-morning breeze gusted along Main Street, a broad and well-rutted strip of the pinkish clay soil of the world officially registered as GPR 7203-C, but known to its inhabitants as Spivey's Find. The street ran aimlessly up a slight incline known as Jake's Mountain. Once-pretentious emporia in a hundred antique styles lined the avenue, their façades as faded now as the town's hopes of development. There was one exception: at the end of the street, crowded between weather-worn warehouses, stood a broad shed of unweathered corrugated polyon, dull blue in color, bearing the words CONCORDIAT WAR MUSEUM blazoned in foot-high glare letters across the front.

Two boys came slowly along the cracked plastron sidewalk and stopped before the sign posted on the narrow, dried-up grass strip before the high, wide building.

"This structure is dedicated to the brave men and women of New Orchard who gave their lives in the Struggle for Peace, AE 2031-36. A sign of progress under Spessard War-

ren, Governor,' " the taller of the boys read aloud. "Some progress," he added, kicking a puff of dust at the shiny sign. " 'Spessard.' That's some name, eh, Dub?" The boy spat on the sign, watched the saliva run down and drip onto the brick-dry ground.

"I'll bet it was fun, being in a war," Dub said. "Except for getting kilt, I mean."

"Come on," Mick said, starting back along the walk that ran between the museum and the adjacent warehouse. "We don't want old Kibbe seeing us and yelling," he added, *sotto voce*, over his shoulder.

In the narrow space between buildings, rank yellowweed grew tall and scratchy. The wooden warehouse siding on the boys' left was warped, the once-white paint cracked and lichen-stained.

"Come on," Mick called, and the smaller boy hurried back to his side. Mick had halted before an inconspicuous narrow door set in the plain plastron paneling which sheathed the sides and rear of the museum. NO ADMITTANCE was lettered on the door.

"Come on." He turned to the door, grasped the latch lever with both hands, and lifted, straining.

"Hurry up, dummy," he gasped. "All you got to do is push. Buck told me." The smaller boy hung back.

"What if we get caught?" he said in a barely audible voice, approaching hesitantly. Then he stepped in and put his weight against the door.

*I come to awareness after a long void in my conscious existence, realizing that I have felt a human touch! Has my commander returned at last? After the last frontal assault by the Yavac units of the enemy, in the fending off of which I expended my action emergency reserves, I recall that my commander ordered me to low alert status. The rest is lost.*

*My ignorance is maddening. Have I fallen into the hands of the enemy . . . ?*

*There are faint sounds, at the edge of audibility. I analyze certain atmospheric vibratory phenomena as human voices. Not that of my commander, alas, since after two hundred standard years he cannot have survived, but has doubtless long ago expired after the curious manner of humans; but surely his replacement has been appointed. I must not overlook the possibility, nay, the likelihood that my new commandant has indeed come at last. Certainly, someone has come to me—*

## *Here is an excerpt from Cobra Strike!, coming in February 1986 from Baen Books:*

The Council of Syndics—its official title—had in the early days of colonization been just that: a somewhat low-key grouping of the planet's syndics and governor-general which met at irregular intervals to discuss any problems and map out the general direction in which they hoped the colony would grow. As the population increased and beachheads were established on two other worlds, the Council grew in both size and political weight, following the basic pattern of the distant Dominion of Man. But unlike the Dominion, this outpost of humanity numbered nearly three thousand Cobras among its half-million people.

The resulting inevitable diffusion of political power had had a definite impact on the Council's makeup. The rank of governor had been added between the syndic and governor-general levels, blunting the pinnacle of power just a bit; and at *all* levels of government the Cobras with their double vote were well represented.

Corwin Moreau didn't really question the political philosophy which had produced this modification of Dominion structure; but from a purely utilitarian point of view he often found the sheer size of the 75-member Council unwieldy.

Today, though, at least for the first hour, things went smoothly. Most of the discussion—including the points Corwin raised—focused on older issues which had already had the initial polemics thoroughly wrung out of them. A handful were officially given resolution, the rest returned to the members for more analysis, consideration, or simple foot-dragging; and as the agenda wound down it began to look as if the meeting might actually let out early.

And then Governor-General Brom Stiggur dropped a pocket planet-wrecker into the room.

It began with an old issue. "You'll all remember the report of two years ago," he said, looking around the room, "in which the Farsearch team concluded

that, aside from our three present worlds, no planets exist within at least a 20-light-year radius of Aventine that we could expand to in the future. It was agreed at the time that our current state of population and development hardly required an immediate resolution of this long-term problem."

Corwin sat a bit straighter in his seat, sensing similar reactions around him. Stiggur's words were neutral enough, but something explosive seemed to be hiding beneath the carefully controlled inflections of his voice.

"However," the other continued, "in the past few days something new has come to light, something which I felt should be presented immediately to this body, before even any follow-up studies were initiated." Glancing at the Cobra guard standing by the door, Stiggur nodded. The man nodded in turn and opened the panel . . . and a single Troft walked in.

A faint murmur of surprise rippled its way around the room, and Corwin felt himself tense involuntarily as the alien made its way to Stiggur's side. The Trofts had been the Worlds' trading partner for nearly 14 years now, but Corwin still remembered vividly the undercurrent of fear that he'd grown up with. Most of the Council had even stronger memories than that: the Troft occupation of the Dominion worlds Silvern and Adirondack had occurred only 43 years ago, ultimately becoming the impetus for the original Cobra project. It was no accident that most of the people who now dealt physically with the Troft traders were in their early twenties. Only the younger Aventinians could face the aliens without wincing.

The Troft paused at the edge of the table, waiting as the Council members dug out translator-link earphones and inserted them. One or two of the younger syndics didn't bother, and Corwin felt a flicker of jealousy as he adjusted his own earphone to low volume. He'd taken the same number of courses in catertalk as they had, but it was obvious that foreign language comprehension wasn't even close to being his forté.

"Men and women of the Cobra Worlds Council," the earphone murmured to him. "I am Speaker One

of the Tlos'khin'fahi demesne of the Troft'e Assemblage." The alien's high-pitched catertalk continued for a second beyond the translation; both races had early on decided that the first three parasyllables of Troft demesne titles were more than adequate for human use, and that a literal transcription of the aliens' proper names was a waste of effort. "The Tlos'khin'fahi demesne-lord has sent your own demesne-lord's request for data to the other parts of the Assemblage, and the result has been a triad offer from the Pua'lanek'zia and Baliu'ckha'spmi demesnes."

Corwin grimaced. He'd never liked deals involving two or more Troft demesnes, both because of the delicate political balance the Worlds often had to strike and because the humans never heard much about the Troft-Troft arm of such bargains. That arm *had* to exist—the individual demesnes seldom if ever gave anything away to each other.

The same line of thought appeared to have tracked its way elsewhere through the room. "You speak of a triad, instead of a quad offer," Governor Dylan Fairleigh spoke up. "What part does the Tlos'khin'fahi demesne expect to play?"

"My demesne-lord chooses the role of catalyst," was the prompt reply. "No fee will be forthcoming for our role." The Troft fingered something on his abdomen sash and Corwin's display lit up with a map showing the near half of the Troft Assemblage. Off on one edge three stars began blinking red. "The Cobra Worlds," the alien unnecessarily identified them. A quarter of the way around the bulge a single star, also outside Troft territory, flashed green. "The world named Qasama by its natives. They are described by the Baliu'ckha'spmi demesne-lord as an alien race of great potential danger to the Assemblage. Here—" a vague-edge sphere appeared at the near side of the flashing green star—"somewhere, is a tight cluster of five worlds capable of supporting human life. The Pua'lanek'zia demesne-lord will give you their location and an Assemblage pledge of human possession if your Cobras will undertake to eliminate the threat of Qasama. I will await your decision."

The Troft turned and left . . . and only slowly did Corwin realize he was holding his breath. Five brand-new worlds . . . for the price of becoming mercenaries.



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*Here is an excerpt from Fred Saberhagen's newest novel, coming in February 1986 from Baen Books:*

# FRED SABERHAGEN THE FRANKENSTEIN PAPERS

## *Chapter 1*

*May? 1782?*

I bite the bear.

I bit the bear.

I have bitten the white bear, and the taste of its blood has given me strength. Not physical strength—that I have never lacked—but the confidence to manage my own destiny, insofar as I am able.

With this confidence, my life begins anew. That I may think anew, and act anew, from this time on I will write in English, here on this English ship. For it seems, now that I try to use that language, that my command of it is more than adequate. Though how that ever came to be, God alone can know.

How *I* have come to be, God perhaps does not know. It may be that that knowledge is, or was, reserved to one other, who has—or had—more right than God to be called my Creator.

My first object in beginning this journal is to cling to the fierce sense of purpose that has been reborn in me. My second is to try to keep myself sane. Or to restore myself to sanity, if, as sometimes seems to me likely, madness is indeed the true explanation of the situation, or condition, in which I find myself—in which I believe myself to be.

But I verge on babbling. If I am to write at all—and I must write—let me do so coherently.

I have bitten the white bear, and the blood of the bear has given me life. True enough. But if anyone who reads is to understand then I must write of other matters first.



Yes, if I am to assume this task—or therapy—of journal-keeping, then let me at least be methodical about it. A good way to make a beginning, I must believe, would be to give an objective, calm description of myself, my condition, and my surroundings. All else, I believe—I must hope—can be built from that.

As for my surroundings, I am writing this aboard a ship, using what were undoubtedly once the captain's notebook and his pencils. The captain was wise not to trust that ink would remain unfrozen.

I am quite alone, and on such a voyage as I am sure was never contemplated by the captain, or the owners, or the builders of this stout vessel, *Mary Goode*. (The bows are crusted a foot thick with ice, an accumulation perhaps of decades; but the name is plain on many of the papers in this cabin.)

A fire burns in the captain's little stove, warms my fingers as I write, but I see by a small sullen glow of sunlight emanating from the south—a direction that here encompasses most of the horizon. Little enough of that sunlight finds its way in through the cabin windows, though one of the windows is now free of glass, sealed only with a thin panel of clear ice.

In every direction lie fields of ice, a world of white unmarked by any work of man except this frozen hulk. What fate may have befallen the particular man on the floor of whose cabin I now sleep—the berth is hopelessly small—or the rest of the crew of the *Mary Goode*, I can only guess. There is no clue, or if a clue exists I am too concerned with my own condition and my own fate to look for it or think about it. I can imagine them all bound in by ice aboard this ship, until they chose, over the certainty of starvation, the desperate alternative of committing themselves to the ice.

Patience. Write calmly.

I have lost count of how many timeless days I have been aboard this otherwise forsaken hulk. There is, of course, almost no night here at present. And there are times when my memory is confused. I have written above that it is May, because the daylight is still waxing steadily—and perhaps because I am afraid it is already June, with the beginning of the months of darkness soon to come.

I have triumphed over the white bear. What, then, do I need to fear?

Only the discovery of the truth, perhaps?

I said that I should begin with a description of myself, but now I see that so far I have avoided that unpleasant task. Forward, then. There is a small mirror in this cabin, frost-glued to the wall, but I have not crouched before it. No matter. I know quite well what I should see. A shape manlike but gigantic, an integument unlike that of any other being, animal or human, that I can remember seeing. Neither Asiatic, African, nor European, mine is a yellow skin that, though thick and tough, seems to lack its proper base, revealing in outline the networked veins and nerves and muscles underneath. White teeth, that in another face would be thought beautiful, in mine surrounded by thin blackish lips, are hideous in the sight of men. Hair, straight, black, and luxuriant; a scanty beard.

My physical proportions are in general those of the race of men. My size, alas, is not. Victor Frankenstein, half proud and half horrified at the work of his own hands, has more than once told me that I am eight feet tall. Not that I have ever measured. Certainly this cabin's overhead is much too low for me to stand erect. Nor, I think, has my weight ever been accurately determined—not since I rose from my creator's work table—but it must approximate that of two ordinary men. No human's clothing that I have ever tried has been big enough, nor has any human's chair or bed. Fortunately I still have my own boots, handmade for me at my creator's—I had almost said my master's—order, and I have such furs and wraps, gathered here and there across Europe, as can be wrapped and tied around my body to protect me from the cold.

Sometimes, naked here in the heated cabin, washing myself and my wrappings as best I can in melted snow, I take a closer inventory. What I see forces me to respect my maker's handiwork; his skill, however hideous its product, left no scars, no visible joinings anywhere.



EDITED BY  
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